

Perry Merrill
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Interviewer
Mark Greenberg

MG Why don't we start with you telling us or the tape who you are and what your involvement in the CCC's was? If you can start out with saying, I'm Perry Merrill and take it from there.

PM I am Perry H. Merrill, former Commissioner of Forest and Parks. Back in 1929 occurred the crash. Very soon the President closed all the banks. Some of them didn't open for some time. Many people lost their funds. Very soon thereafter President Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933. I might say that previous to that in 1920, I had a fellowship for a study Royal Ecology of Forestry in Stockholm, Sweden where I took trips with the Swedes on skis in the fur forest in Northern Sweden. At that time there was no skiing here. Everybody used snowshoes. I got the idea I would like to do something for skiing when I returned, but there was nothing that showed up until the CCC's arrived. So I immediately grasped my former idea and established the first CCC camp in Waterbury to work on the trails at Mt. Mansfield, Stowe. Eventually we had 20 CCC camps to layout work for. And for each camp, I had to hire at least 8 foremen to look after the work. At Stowe, I was very fortunate in getting Charles Lord who later was considered the best and most knowledgable ski designer in the country to layout the trails at Mt. Mansfield. Then there were 3 camps that were offered which was Vermont's quota then. The next camp was established at Burke Mountain following one at Jay Peak and later one at Ascutney and then Akimo. At Killington we developed the area, put in the highway leading to the restaurant and recreation room which we built. But the skiing was developed by Mr. Smith. Maybe I should go out of the actual time of construction. Mr. Smith came to me as a young man and wanted to develop the ski trails on Ascutney Mountain. Well I said to him, your foolish and he sort of settled down in his chair in apparent disgust. Well I said to him, Preston, you go over to Killington and spend the winter studying the snow depth at Killington. Of course before that I had had Charles Lord and Sep Ruce go down to the mountain to look it over to fortify my thoughts on the possibility of skiing there. Well that's how Killington got started and it has developed into one of the largest areas. But at Mt. Mansfield we went ahead under Charles' direction put in the skis there and the warming shelter that naturally has to go along with the development. At Jay the same procedure followed. I might aside I forget names right now without looking up in the book.

MG That's okay, we can stop to look up anything you want.

PM Titles of the people that were on the job. That followed by as I mentioned earlier the work at Jay Peak. Jay Peak was a gift by Mr. Lucas Darling around the early '30's. And Ascutney we purchased. And Killington we purchased and the same with Akimo. Mt. Mansfield was of course acquired chiefly by purchase. It includes land on the other side of the mountain. I don't know just what more, how you want it or...

MG Can you tell us what the CCC was, first of all?

PM Well the CCC was established during the period after the crash. There was so much unemployment in the United States and the object was to put the 18 year old youths and older to work out in the forests. Not only did they build ski trails which I mentioned, but here in Vermont from the 20 camps we built highways with them. In all we put in about 150 miles of highways. We did the complete park development for camping and picnicing in all the areas. There were other areas in addition to those that I have mentioned where part of the camps were not located we went out to those with a crew and developed those. That's how we got the work done. Of course somebody had to be responsible. It was my job to direct what ought to be done and where. There is another point that many people probably don't think of if they think at all. A lot of people don't think much you know. Nobody directed me to accept camp or told me where to put them. Nobody after I got the first 3 camps said well you need to go to Washington since you have heard that other states have given up camps. I made several trips and each time I got a few more camps until I got 20. It wasn't a 7 hour day. You run into 10 or more.

MK So were there some states that didn't want the allotted number of camps?

PM Oh yes, there were many. There were many states that didn't, yes.

MK I didn't realize that. I guess I thought everybody would be pretty happy about getting...

PM A lot of people don't want to work. I mean you have to have somebody that has a little initiative or you don't get things done. A lot of the states of course had more wealth than the State of Vermont and they could do it in their own way. They didn't realize they were getting the

amount of free help that was available. That's probably the reason that not all of them wanted to take camps or take more than what they did take, yes.

MG Were you the state forester at that time?

PM Yea.

MG That's what your position was? What was the relation between foresting and skiing? I know you were in Sweden and you learned about skiing there. How is that connected to forestry?

PM How is that connected to forestry? Laugh. Well in one way it is connected to it because it is a good way to get around in the woods. That's what I did as I said in Sweden. I was given a pair of skis, cross country skis and poles by a generous person so I could make the trip. That was back when I was just really beginning in my profession so to speak. I did my first work in the State in 1915, the summer vacation of my junior year in college. See I will be 93 my next birthday.

MG Where were you born?

PM I was born at Westport, New York, just across the lake from Vergennes. In those days Burlington was the trading center for people. It probably is now to a certain extent but not as much as it was then because...this has nothing to do in a sense with skiing, but it does hook-up with the whole story in a way. We had the Ticonderoga one of the nice steamers that the company, Lake Champlain Transportation Company operated and it tied up overnight at Westport and left early in the morning for a day trip to Burlington. Many people, it was pretty well filled. They went to Burlington to trade. That's probably how I got my idea about applying for a job in Vermont because I had learned something about it. I guess probably the first trip I made was when I was maybe about 5 or 6 years old. The only thing I recall, the good thing that my mother did for me, she made a little deposit in the Burlington Savings Bank, that grew and taught me a lesson or I wouldn't have been able to go to Sweden. So everything ties in you know in this world. You don't realize it at the time, but one thing leads to another.

MG What was Burlington like in 1915?

PM It looked like an awful big city to me in those days. I don't recall anymore than you do. I went to New York City soon after that probably trips that I took

with my father. My father had a job at the time there was a severe disease in cattle and he had charge of all the inspection work, particularly in checking on cattle coming in from the Canadian border. Then he had to go to Washington for some reason or another, I don't know. I used to get a nice trip and see some of the world. I have seen a lot of it since.

MG Getting back to the skiing. I can understand cross-country skiing as a means of getting through the woods, but when you talked about the ski development, the trails that went in under the CCC's, these were downhill ski trails, right?

PM Yea, oh yea.

MG Did you anticipate that someday there might be a conflict between conservation and development?

PM Well as I was saying, in Sweden, I don't know just what your driving at or what you expect from that question?

MG Well I think there are people today who feel that some of the...

Phone

MG that some of the ski areas, the ski areas are growing and expanding and that is endangering the natural resources in the mountains.

PM Well back in '33 when we put the first trails in, some of the people were saying, Merrill is defacing the mountain. Then here about perhaps 3 years ago when in the spring skiing period, there was very little snow so there were very few skiing. I know my friend Bob Mitchell in Rutland wrote an article in the paper to the effect that Vermont is losing millions of dollars, that is the other side of the question. So things in life have to be sort of equalized. Another thing that people at times do not think about is what nature does. Nature replenishes things and reclothes us, gives us something to eat and produces acid rain which is advantageous to you and I. Where would we get the acid; a lot of it for our systems what didn't come from the plants that grow. All this yelling about acid rain. This is outside of the question, but acid rain produced the riches of the prairie. Where did that come from. There wasn't any industries. It came from the volcanos that are still pouring acids. We got about 20 or 25 from Washington north through Alaska. Around 2000 or 3000 of our prevailing winds are all from that direction. So early farmers used up

a lot of that soil richness and then they had to buy fertilizer. You never hear them mentioning about the acidity. Oh it comes from people liked to form an organization to make a job for themselves. Somebody got a hold of this without looking into it, they make a big scare for people. But I checked up with the water resources here. I said what is the acidity content of our water supply in the pond up here. They said practically none. Back around the early '20's, I made my first trip on top of Mt. Mansfield. There were dead spruces there then. Nobody can prove to me that acid rain kills trees or kills sugar maples. Sugar maples are killed in the first place, hurricanes blow off leaves in ??? season, so it doesn't get the nourishment to make the growth, it weakens the tree. There are insects. There are all kinds of insects. Some that bore into the center of the trees. Some hit the limbs. Some get into the roots you know. Then there is fungi that kills eventually. It is all of that. This is all aside, but I thought you ought to know the facts. Laugh. I try to preach them.

MK Did you realize what an economic boom skiing would be to Vermont when you came back from Sweden?

PM Well, I probably wasn't thinking about that. Somewhere I was thinking about giving it pleasure to the people. I am not a person that is a dollar lover. No, that's a big curse of our country today; is the dollar. Laziness, people aren't working hard. Putting two people to do where one ought to be. That is what is putting us in this serious situation. Maybe you are going to lose your job within 4 or 5 years, could be. You don't know what 1927, 1929 and all of the '30's were. With the banks closed here. People in Montpelier used to tell about New York City, some days lately, people going to the garbage pails. I have seen them go here back in the '30's to find something to eat, so get fortified. That was the last thing probably on my mind, what money was going to make. At the time, I was interested in developing the sport of downhill skiing. Of course, to go back further, my father was a Civil War veteran. And after the Civil War, he went west. He lived there about 5 years. His brother went with him. He used to tell me about the skiing out there in California at the time. A lot about it. One day, probably back around 1912, I knocked a hogs head to pieces and got a couple staves out of it and went and cut the end off from the double reins of the harness for toe straps and I had some skis back then. So that was my first interest in skiing so to speak. It wasn't a commercial ???,

it was just my own enjoyment. Then I made one of these... skiing a block of wood off the wood pile for an upright piece and a little piece to sit on as a seat and I had a jumper.

MG What were the CCC camps like? Can you describe one of the camps? Did you live at the camp?

PM No, No. Well there were like any barracks today. Anybody that had seen an army barracks, they were the same. There were those that were for sleeping and they had one for recreation and they had another for the kitchen and the dining room. They were rough boards outside and shingled roof. They were 75 or more feet long. They were probably oh! 50 feet some of them. If they were 50 feet, you would need four I think to take care of 200 boys. That's what you got to a camp. So we had 20 times 200 is the number of youths we had working. Some ski trails, others recreation.

MG Was it run like the army? Was it disciplined?

PM We had an army officer as a commander of the camp as far as looking after their food and health and living. Then I had to hire somebody as a superintendent to carryout the plans that were sent to me. That was the operational process.

MG What would a day be like? A typical day.

PM What?

MG What would a typical day be like? When did they wake up? What was the routine?

PM Well probably they got up close to 6:00 in the morning and had their breakfast and went out probably around 8:00. I guess they probably, depending where they were. A lot of the time they worked away from the camp and may have travelled 20 miles in a truck. It might be later in the evening before they got back. In general, you don't remember probably all the details at the time unless you stop and think. You weren't interested perhaps. Unless you are interested or notice specifically, why it doesn't register up here for too long.

MK Did the men go through a sort of basic training period to get ready for the kind of work they were going to do when they came into the camps?

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PM The training was to take them out on the job and tell them what to do.

MK So there was no...

PM They had never worked. They didn't know what to do. They never used any tools of any kind, most of them. We had a lot of them out of New York City. Vermont, oh I guess 200 or 300 of the 4,000 would be Vermonters. The rest of them were from outside Vermont so we got a lot of benefit from that. As far as the financial end of it, they talk mostly about the income from skiing. But think of the number of people that have been enticed to Vermont to camp and picnic. I don't think anybody has ever made a study to see what it amounts too. As far as summer homes, a lot of those things are a break-off from people coming here and seeing Vermont. That was started before we had much advertising.

MG Was it a rough life?

PM What?

MG Was it a rough life in the camps?

PM Not particularly I wouldn't think.

MK Did they run you around?

PM What?

MK Did they run you around. Were people out building roads and cutting trails in the winter as well as in the warmer weather?

PM They worked the year around doing something. They were doing forestry work, the same as any landowner would do, only maybe under more technical supervision than some of them. Yea, yea, you could build roads in the winter. You cut out the right-of-way or you lay them out trails and cut the trees and lines for the trails. You can do it in the winter, just as well as in the summer. Only it is a little colder on the fingers.

MG Do you remember how much they got paid?

PM Oh, about \$1.00 a day, I think. I think \$30.00 a month, I think it what they got and their clothes. If you had to buy the clothes today, we would get good pay. Yea, you could buy a suit of clothes for about \$10.00 or \$15.00 then. I got \$4,000 at commissioner. That

lasted...legislature then came in and they cut us, they cut everybody in state government 12% down to \$2,500. It was about time that Mrs. Merrill and I had a couple more added to our family. That was beginning to pinch. That lasted for about 10 years before they decided that we better come back to what we originally got.

MG I understand that there were different recreational things that took place at the camp. Newspapers

PM Oh, they had everything to take up their time. Probably later on, I don't know how soon it occurred, but they had another person known as an educational instructor at the camps. A lot of them probably couldn't read and write, I don't recall. I wouldn't want to make a statement but I would expect that was quite true. Some of them can't today, not intelligently. Do you know why?

MK Why?

PM Your mother used to hold you close to her breast, a loving mother and her loving daughter. Well when this dollar began to get less and less instead of more and more, more and more of them, the wife went away from the home to work and put the youngsters out. Somebody else to look after them. Then they came home at night and in a lot of cases naturally, after working supposedly hard, she is tired and she doesn't take the time today to check up on it. I think that is true. She doesn't give the care of trying to teach the youngsters arithmetic, reading or anything. There is where the problem is today in the schools. It isn't the teachers I don't think. It maybe some of the younger teachers up to 30 years old that lived under those conditions. I wonder if you think you agree with me.

MK I will have to think about that one.

PM Well, what would you do with some youngsters.

MK I have two.

PM If you worked all day, you wouldn't be able to want to give the time. That's human nature. It is human nature for the youngster to be loved. That's what makes them sort of stray away from the mother. I watch kids around from different families and see what happens. I am quite an observer. I observe how people walk. I see them how they turn over their shoes and so on. A lot of things you know you can't help.

MG How do you feel about the CCC's? Was it a good program?

PM It saved the country.

MG Were you a Roosevelt supporter?

PM What's that?

MG Were you a Roosevelt supporter?

PM I don't belong to the Democratic party if that's what you want to know. No. We had lots of good people and good ideas and I was supportive naturally. On a program like that, I would support anybody. I am not tied to a party. No everybody is due to their rights for what they are accomplishing. When it comes to some foolish things, why you stray away regardless of what party you belong to. I think the people are more so today than they were years ago. Probably that's what began to make them think more of what's good for the country rather than what's good for the party. A lot of them still think what's good for the party and forget the rest of it, but anybody that does something that's for the welfare of human beings should be respected.

MG There is somebody at your back door.

PM Yea...

MK When you were working with the CCC's, did you have any contact with people in the Green Mountain Club and work on the Long Trail?

PM Well I was probably one of those who helped start the Green Mountain Club.

MK How?

PM We improved trails here and there. We naturally did quite a lot of work. Those today know nothing about it. It is funny, it is natural. We like to pat ourselves on the back for what we are doing and forget about what somebody else had done in the past, for us you know. I am not one that condemns people for that, but it is natural, it is human. People are like that. I have been over most of the mountains around the state. He's back up.

MG Yea. Do you remember the debate about the Green Mountain Highway?

PM Oh yea.

MG To build a highway across...

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PM Oh yea. Yea.

MG Can you talk about that? What that was all about?

PM Well there are those who thought it was a wonderful thing for Vermont to build this highway along the Green Mountains. I am not one of those. Never was.

MK How did that idea come about in the first place?

PM What?

MK Where did that idea originate...?

PM I don't know who was the originator. Generally the originator is somebody that figures it is a good thing for a dollar worth. It is the dollar that starts a lot of things. The thought to make money. Maybe it's the fellow that ran a hotel near it. It could be, I don't know. I don't remember or recall who were the promoters. It finally got killed when they voted on it. But then you get somebody with an idea that thinks its good and then somebody else that starts an organization to get a job for themselves, then they promote it. There are the promoters. Well we got the State Chamber of Commerce, but you got a group around the Berlin Side of the State that has to have their own, Lake Champlain Chamber of Commerce you know instead of letting the State Chamber cover it all. That is the way things grow.

MG Why were you opposed to the idea?

PM What?

MG Of the Green Mountain Highway.

PM Well I think probably it was an economic viewpoint. It is a very costly thing even though it figured that Uncle Sam was going to pay for a lot of it and it wasn't going to benefit. It wasn't going to leave Vermont in the natural really natural condition. It would really, where it would run, would make scars, it could. When they conceived it, I don't think they had an idea of the problems. They couldn't go clear to the peaks anyway if they wanted to. I guess probably one of things was their big arguments are the views that you would get up there. Anybody wanted to get a view, they could walk up the mountain. You get some nice views of Lake Champlain up top of Camels Hump or Mansfield. One thing I did out of Waterbury was at the height of the land I built a small camp to take care of 25 that were working on trails to have them near their work. That was before we moved the whole camp. The main camp was in Waterbury Village.

It took quite a lot of transportation to move them up there and back every day, so we built small camps. Side camps they were called. We had them in other places too. Side Camps instead of transporting for instance. Ellis Park, we had Camp Northfield, then we built small ones to work there. Of course eventually we gave up the camp in Waterbury, a full camp ???.

MK What happened to those camps? Are any of them still in use?

PM Sold them to somebody. They belonged to the government. They were sold, I assume, most of them. Or, if somebody donated use of land, why maybe it was in the condition that when it was over to revert to them. So a fellow was wise to put that in a lease. I don't know.

MK I wondered if any of them were turned into recreational areas after the camps ???

PM I think some of them some places were used for awhile for recreational use locally. That is just a dim view. I couldn't spot one right offhand.

MG What were some of the other projects besides the ski trails and the hiking trails that the CCC worked on?

PM Well as I said...

MG Let me turn the tape over before we do that. Just a second okay. A little sound first.

PM See those trees out there. I have got them all around. My land goes way back pretty near to the other street. I have enough room for another house in back. I did have a big garden up until about 3 or 4 years ago when it got too much of a chore. I got a little small one now. I set those trees out. I have got them all around the border. They are about 40 years old now. Right around that. They make a good wind break from the north wind; north and west. It does blow right up over Hubbard Park at times. I had a woodworking plant here. I made these folding chairs.

MG So I was asking about what other projects the CCC people did.

PM Well as I mentioned in the beginning, it included about 150 miles of highways on state land. We did build a road which serves now as a state highway. It hooked Groton up with Marshfield. It is a state highway now. But just mostly for the management and operation of the lands. Getting

people into a camping area or picnic area. Outside of those, those were the main directives for groups or individual small groups. Of course, we did a lot of forest stand improvement work. We generally had maybe 20 or 25 in a group carrying that out. 20 or 25 on a campsite. One of the big benefits is it taught a lot of them masonry. Building fireplaces or building construction work, they did the work. So when they got out, they had a trade. That was one of the benefits.

MK What about flood control projects? Were there some?

PM Well we had about 1,500 here that built the big dam up above here.

MK The Wrightsville Dam?

PM Yea, yea. The mailman must have come. Back in '27, we bought this place in '29 and we lived across the street which is a little above here by the river. Over there the water was up to the ceiling. This house it was up ... So, that CCC job was very valuable to the people in Montpelier. Down State and Main Street, we had 14 feet of water. It was up into the second story of the stores down there. So with heavy rains you see, November 2, 3 and 4, 1937, it poured and poured. It didn't take long before the water got over the banks. A wife or neighbor on one of the higher streets here came over and she helped my wife take; we had two children then; got out of the place in water knee deep when they got out to higher ground and stayed for a couple days and everything was soaking. Mattresses unless they were the type that floated, then didn't get too wet. You opened the windows and through everything out. A lot of things that you lost. It got wet. That is one CCC job that did lots of work and help for not only Montpelier but anywhere in the U.S.A. where they had flood problems. Lots of them may have been larger or even smaller. Of course we put in ponds. That's the other recreation. We put a little dam in and got a recreational place for swimming. But like Groton, you might be interested in one thing if you notice here, these timbers, well this probably was the original home that was here. Just the width of this room, bath, living room, kitchen. They added on as time went on. When you see timbers on these old homes, you know there are old. This was built about 1830, this part.

MG When did the CCC leave Vermont?

PM '42

MG Why did it end then?

PM Why did they leave? The money ran out. Appropriations for it. Many of the states now have their own CCC camps. Either they call them youth corps or something. I think it would be a good thing if more of them had them. That's the other thing when a mother goes to work, the kids are out older ones there. Running around and getting into mischief. Look at the break ins we are getting. A couple of women went up street a few nights ago, went in to a house and wanted to use the phone and find out something. I don't know where the woman was or wife. The husband looked at the second woman, she went upstairs and came down and went out and after they left they went up and they had got into some drawers and went off with their jewelry. Right here. Back soon after we bought this place, there were back stairs in what is my garage and then there was a free way of getting through. We had a person that got in. It was a light door they smashed through. At that time we had a young girl; I guess she was going to school and we took pity on here and let her have a room up here. Anyway she came in so nothing much happened other than she broke through the door and she got scared and left. Next door here there were the owner and then there were two apartments there and then the daughter lives upstairs. The woman was in the house just asleep and somebody came in here two or three years ago, right in the same room where she was and took her pocketbook and walked out. It is an awful world. So a lot of the CCC I think, did a lot for the youths. They were taught things that they never got at home as to how they should behave, how they should work. I don't know, I thought it was a great thing for the nation.

MG Do you still keep in touch with any of the people from the CCC days?

PM Well you see most of them of the 300, I don't know how many on natural conditions there are probably maybe 50 left in Vermont. You see from '33 on, the death rate begins living in the younger generation. It seems so it was getting younger all the time. Where they live, I don't know. Oh, a few of them. No direct contact. Some of them will come up to me and say I was in the ...most of them came from other places and some stayed here and married a Vermont girl and are living here in ????. I don't get around the state. No, I drive a car. I don't need any glasses for driving. Oh, I drive. Ann, she is the same age as I am. So we don't drive out of Montpelier much. It tires you. At night these ???

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headlights. You go down, they are pretty glarey. I don't like to look at them.

MG Who are some people we might go talk to about the CCC camps in those days?

PM Gosh if I could tell you I would.

MG Okay

PM I don't know whether, let's see.

MG What about Charles Lord?

PM He is in Stowe. Yea. I guess he is well, I don't know. I never hear from any of them. I was trying to think whether there are any around here.

MG We have the names of a couple. Did you know Gino Carmolli, he lives in Barre?

PM I know the name, but I don't recall what he did.

MG Apparently he was an educational advisor at Rickers Mills.

PM I don't know. There are Carmolli's I know.

MG Yea.

PM Have you looked in the telephone books?

MG Yes, I just thought you might remember some of the people we don't know about and have some ideas.

PM You will find his name there.

MK We think he may be in Florida. We haven't been able to reach him.

PM Oh. Lots of people go to Florida. I have never had the...I have been in Florida. Both of us. In the summer. But I have no desire going. Right offhand I can't recall.

MG Well I think for now, this will probably do and we may call you again as we go on in the project. One thing is if we can just sit for about a minute, we need to record just the sound of the room just the way it is. We have some of that.

MK We should also get it when the furnace goes on.

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MG If it goes on.

PM A lot of these things you don't think about unless somebody brings them up the same as you do unless something comes up to remind you of it. No the only way I can write about a lot of the skiing around these other places, I have to get it from the areas, get their stories. I have in my books, I have got three of them there that I have written. I wrote the "History of the State", The History of Montpelier", The History of the CCC Nationwide Story". Then I wrote the autobiographical story of "90 Years". In two of those on skiing, I have to go back to what I have written even to write it. Same on the CCC or anything to recall it. A lot of it, I know they were skiing there, but that's all I know. Because we are near to it. I thought it would be an interesting story. To know how they got started. I like to use the names of the people like Darling over at...like Lucas Darling. Like a fellow Preston Smith down at Killington, how he came to me and wanted to put skiing down at Ascutney and I discouraged him. He is a millionaire I guess today. Smith, boy he has done well down there at Killington.