

National Canal Museum

Transcript of Oral History Interview of George Carlson

Interview Conducted by Albright Zimmerman and Lance Metz

1996

Time: 2:35 p.m.

Place: Home of Mr. George Carlson, 344 Spenser Lane, Warminster, PA

Date: ???

Interviewers: Lance Metz, Albright Zimmerman

Interviewees: Mr. George Carlson

Mr. Metz: Do you have any objections to us using this tape for research?

Mr. Carlson: Not at all.

Mr. Metz: Okay, Mr. Carlson, we are going to begin talking about your life around the canal, and what you remember about the canal. I was told you grew up in Lumberville.

Mr. Carlson: In 1926 we moved to the Solebury area ^{from} in Jersey City, New Jersey. We lived on a farm owned by my grandparents. That's my very first recollection of the Delaware Canal. We lived, I would say, a mile or a mile and a half away from the canal on a little road called Laurel Road which went from the Solebury area down to River Road on Route 32. On certain atmospheric conditions we could hear the horns from the canal barge blowing before ^{the locks for them to} they opened the locks. Now this was the late 20's, as I say, we moved there in 1926. I was born in 1921 so I was in the neighborhood of 5 years old when this was happening, but I can still remember. I can remember the tone of them. My parents, of course, told me what it was. I didn't know at the time. I really had no knowledge of such a thing, being a city boy, or a city child. But we could hear it, and we knew the canal was still in operation. Well, in retrospect of course. I didn't even know about canals back in those days. The other thing I remember about that time frame is that my dad, living on the farm, used to take care of the mules that towed the canal barges in the wintertime when the canal froze over and they ceased operation. The local people would, of course for compensation, take care of the mules. They had to go somewhere.

Mr. Metz: What was your father's name?

Mr. Carlson: David.

Mr. Metz: And your mother's name?

Mr. Carlson: Marion.

Mr. Metz: Whereabouts exactly was the address of your farm?

Mr. Carlson: It had no actual address, but it was called Spring Farm. It was on Laurel Lane, going between Susan Road and Route 32. The farm was owned at that time by Matt Hughes who was my mother's father. The old family name of Fell was in there somewhere. My dad and mom farmed the farm for her father.

Mr. Metz: How much was your father paid for taking care of the farm?

Mr. Carlson: I have no idea.

Mr. Metz: Did you ever help him take care of the mules?

Mr. Carlson: I was very young. The one thing that I remember was that he warned me to stay away from them. The mules were unpredictable and they are large and not as gentle or tame as horses. They were big buggers. I remember he said, "Stay away from them." He was a horse farmer. I mean he knew about things like this.

Mr. Metz: Do you want to tell us some more about your experiences with the canal. Is there anything you can remember?

Mr. Carlson: Yes, that is what I remember about living on the farm on Laurel Lane. Now around 1930 or so, even before the canal closed down entirely, the farm was sold to a New Yorker, one of the first New Yorkers who came into the area, into Bucks County to buy up these farms and create estates. We moved to a tenant farm. The owner of that farm was Sam Paxson, one of the two Paxson brothers who owned big peach and apple orchards in the area, which was on a road that ran from the ^{Cattalossa} ??? up to a road that I cannot remember, but only about 3/4 of a mile or so from the canal. My dad worked for Sam Paxson as an orchard worker and lived in a tenant farm in that area. That is when I have more vivid recollections about the canal. We only lived about 3/4 of a mile or so away from it. That was my summer playground. There was a young man, a boy, my age between 8 or 10, somewhere in that neighborhood whose parents were lock tenders near Redfield Island. Do you know Redfield Island?
^{at the lock}

Mr. Metz: Yes.

Mr. Carlson: Okay, that was between Center Bridge and Lumberville, if you know the area. Are you familiar with the area as old timers?

Mr. Metz: Yes.

Mr. Carlson: I'm not referring to you, you look much younger than I, right here on my left. Okay, right at the end of the road that we lived on were these people named Heineman. The young boy who I became acquainted with was Carl Heineman. As I say that was our summer playground. Right above that lock that he tended was an old swimming, what would you call it?

Mr. Metz: Pavilion?

Mr. Carlson: It was shaped like a, built in the form of a canal boat or something with a roof on it for people to change their clothing. Do you remember that?

Mr. Zim: No.

Mr. Carlson: Okay, well it was there. It was a popular swimming hole or swimming place on the canal. The canal widened out just a little bit and they had this clothes changing pavilion and

picnic area where people would go. It was the only place in the area to go for a swim back in those days. That was the very early 30's before all the laws that prevented swimming in open water. It was a very popular place. So that was there and we swam in the canal. And as I say it was a very popular place for people to swim. We spent, I spent so many hours on that canal in the summer time.

Mr. Metz: Did you ever hitch a ride on the boat?

Mr. Carlson: We did that all the time. In fact there is a vivid, well I have a written description too. Yes, the lock tender's kid, they had an old aluminum boat, row boat, and when we would be out there and when we would hear the horn blow we would get in the boat, wait for them to come through the lock and say, "Hey throw us a line." And they would. We were never refused. What do they care. They had nothing to do anyway. So they would throw us a line and we would go as far as we felt like going, usually in the direction of New Hope. For some reason we liked that part of the canal better than going up toward Lumberville. We were never refused. But sometimes after we had gone for an hour or so, and waited and waited, no boats were coming back the other way. So that meant get on a horse and go. We had that occasion to. But just drifting along and being towed and just doing nothing really.

Mr. Metz: Did you ever ice skate on the canal in the wintertime?

Mr. Carlson: Yes we did that all the time. I went to school on Green Hill Road, about a quarter of a mile up from River Road. It was an eight grade school house. Eight grades in one room. The years that I went there they were taught by a Mrs. Caswell from New Hope. She lived in the New Hope area. She was a real nice lady. When the canal was frozen over, during the noon hour recess, she would let us take our skates and go down and skate on the canal, when it was frozen of course.

Mr. Zim: In those days, they weren't shoe skates, were they?

Mr. Carlson: No, they were old clamp on skates. Only rich people had shoe skates and nobody was rich back in those days. Yes, they were the clamp ons. So we skated on the canal. I do remember, it was around 1932 or 1933, because it was the only year I could remember skating on the Delaware River. The river was frozen. It was the coldest winter that they had around here in years and years. It wasn't solid frozen, like you would depict a skating rink. But ice flows had jammed up somewhere downstream and any open water froze in between. So it was a matter of skating on the open water, jump over the hummocks and skate again. I remember that very vividly.

Mr. Metz: Do you have some other memories that you could tell us about?

Mr. Carlson: Other than walking along the canal. I went to school in Lumberville. We lived over at Paxson's farm which meant walking, oh maybe a half a mile down to Cutalosa Road. Then sometimes we'd walk to Cutalosa or walk a little bit further past the quarry and climb up over the hill because that's where we lived. And I remember it was such a beautiful walk, it always was. It fascinated me always.

Mr. Zim: When they talked about hitching rides on the boats, some of them talked about simply hanging onto the rudder and letting the boats pull them.

Mr. Carlson: We never did that. That's too much work. It's better to ask them to throw you a line. So we never did that. But when you were riding along the canal behind a boat, it was the most peaceful thing.

Mr. Metz: Do you remember some of the names of the people, the boat people that you got rides from?

Mr. Carlson: Not at all. I don't even remember if they were gentile or rough. I don't remember a thing about them. I do remember when we got to the lock we would say hey throw us a rope and they would throw us a rope.

Mr. Zim: Now you were around after the canal closed down.

Mr. Carlson: Yes.

Mr. Zim: Were you involved in any way in the efforts of the Protective Association or anything like that?

Mr. Carlson: No, not at all.

Mr. Zim: Did you know those people?

Mr. Carlson: No. I'm trying to think when we moved away from that area. We moved to Carversville when I was in seventh grade. It wasn't in operation. It was still in the general area. We used to go down there all the time and skate during the wintertime. It was one of the places to go swimming and one of the places to go fishing in that area. One of the things that I remember about it is gigging for frogs.

Mr. Zim: In the canal?

Mr. Carlson: In the canal. Have you ever heard of it?

Mr. Metz/Mr. Zim: No. Tell us about it.

Mr. Carlson: We used to fish for them in two ways. They were great big bull frogs. You know they can get darn big. By rowing along very quietly and watching the bank, because that's where they sat, a gig is a ~~trig~~^{dart} shaped spear with fish-hooked type prongs on a bamboo pole maybe eight feet long; you would sneak up on these things and the guy on the bow. If you come up behind them they don't see you and you'd get close enough andyou got them! Hopefully, not always. Now there was another way to fish for frogs and that's by using a fairly stiff pole, a short length of line, a fish hook, and a piece of red flannel about like so. Once you saw the frog you would push the pole out and come up behind them and ~~go~~^{put} over top of his head, and like that--grab him. We, being sadistic little buggers, once we got a couple of frogs we

would cut off the hind legs. That's all you could eat.

Mr. Zim: You did eat the frogs?

Mr. Carlson: Oh, yes. Frog legs are wonderful. I love frog legs. I still buy frog legs.

Mr. Zim: Yes, but a lot of people don't realize that.

Mr. Carlson: Oh I know that. But we used to build a fire somewhere along the canal or the river wherever we could find something, poke them on a stick, put them out over the fire, and let them cook.

Mr. Metz: What other kinds of fish did you catch in the canal?

Mr. Carlson: Bass. I've seen beautiful bass, I've caught beautiful bass. There used to be a carp fishery, or a carp tank where a commercial fisherman somewhere from Trenton area, this was right below that Redfield Lock, it was a big tank, and he would catch carp and put them in there. You would have to let carp soak for a few days, cleanse them. And that was there. But we used to catch carp, darn big carp too sometimes. You could see them in there, 20, 30 pounders. We would catch sunfish, yellow perch, catfish, eels, occasional rock bass, but they would only be at the end of streams where they came into the canal. It was an ideal childhood really.

Mr. Metz: Is there any one particular story that you haven't touched on that sticks out in your mind. Did you ever have any problems with the canal or anything other than just a good time?

Mr. Carlson: I think, we never had any bad times. One of the big things that happened while we were living in that area was when the viaduct over the ^{Tohickon} ~~Tohickon~~ Creek collapsed.

Mr. Metz: Did you see it happen?

Mr. Carlson: No, but we went up to see it after it happened. I wish I had seen it happen. That was a real big thing in the area, you know. The whole thing all of a sudden was in the ^{Tohickon} ~~Tohickon~~ Creek.

Mr. Zim: Supposedly some men ran off of it just as it happened.

Mr. Carlson: Yes that would have been interesting. But we certainly ran up to see it afterwards. I guess we took the horse and wagon to go up.

Mr. Zim: Did you swim in it, because that was a favorite swimming spot.

Mr. Carlson: Yes, it was, at that canal boat swimming hole or whatever they called it. I could draw a picture of that damn thing. I remember it so vividly. I was shaped just like a barge with cubicals where you could change your clothing, an old diving board.

Mr. Zim: Did either you or your friends ever run trap lines along the canal for muskrats?

Mr. Carlson: No. Never did. I never ran them for muskrats. I ran them up where we lived. It was one of the ways that young people made money back in those days. Skunks, possums, coons, fox, weasels.

Mr. Zim: You sold them to Sears and Roebuck?

Mr. Carlson: No, we didn't sell them to Sears. We sold them to local fur dealers, in the carcass, you know. We'd get a dollar a pound for a weasel. There was a state boundary. I never got around to skinning them or curing them. You'd sell the thing whole. Here, buy it! Fifty cents for a skunk, depending on the amount of black. Black was the prime. The more white that was on them, the less money you got for them. I never made any money, any big dollars, because there was never any big dollars around.

Mr. Zim: That was always exciting for a youngster.

Mr. Carlson: Well it was something. It was something you never had, and the only way to get it. As far as anything unusual happening, no.

Mr. Metz: Is there anything you would like to add to what you have already said, that you have forgotten that maybe we haven't touched on?

Mr. Zim: Oh, you have a description written there. Do you want to share that with us?

Mr. Carlson: Oh, sure. I wrote this after I had contacted your outfit and never got any response. I was just going to send up to Easton. Let's see I'll read it with you. My name is George Carlson, etc., etc., and now down to business. I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, 12/14/21. We moved to Solebury in 1926. I have lived in the area ever since. My earliest recollections of the canal as a very young child are sounds of the canal boat horns when we lived on my grandfather's farm named Spring Farm which was located on Laurel Lane about 1 mile in from ^{Solebury}Shooby Road. When the wind and atmospheric conditions were right we could hear the horns signaling for an opening of the lock near Redfield Island. This lock was between Center Bridge and Lumberville. More of this lock later in this article. We lived on an 118 acre farm on Laurel Lane and during the winters after canal traffic stopped because of ice my dad boarded some of the mules used to tow the barges. He would take four mules and keep them for the winter. I remember being cautioned to keep away from them because they were not friendly animals. During this time 1926 to 1930 we didn't visit the canal very much but I have a few memories. There was a bathing house where people changed into swim suits, shaped like a boat, not swim suits shaped like a boat, that's inference, shaped like a boat or barge of some type located near the aforementioned lock between Center Bridge and Lumberville. The canal was a good place for swimming, deep, clean and really the only place to swim in the area. My aunts and uncles when visiting our farm would consider swimming there as part of their visit. During this time frame there was a wooden aqueduct over the ^{Shooby}Tohickan Creek at Point Pleasant. I remember visiting the area after the old wooden structure failed and fell into the creek bed.

Mr. Zim: That was actually steel. It was 1894 when Edgemont Steel built the body of it.

Mr. Carlson: Well my recollection was that it was wood, but that was years ago.

Mr. Zim: Well you would have had no way of knowing. I have been through the records on that one.

Mr. Carlson: That kind of event was considered big news back then. In 1930 the old farm was sold to settle the estate of George and Mary ???, ^{Madsen} my grandparents. We moved to an area nearby. The farm was sold to people named Lathen from New York. They were among the first rich New Yorkers to pick up country places in the area. We moved to a farm that was part of Sam Paxón's orchard. This was across the road from his brother Ed who also was an orchardist. Incidentally Ed Paxón was the man who raised James Mitchner, our local celebrity. My dad was a caretaker and worker for Sam Paxón and the place where we lived was about one mile from the canal, just below Lumberville which what I think was called Paxón Road. I'm not sure about that one. During this time I went to the school on Green Hill Road in Lumberville. This was an eight grade, one room school with one teacher. Her name was Mrs. Caswell and I remember her fondly as being a wonderful lady. During the winter when the canal was frozen over, we were allowed to go to the canal and skate during our noon recess. This was sometime around 1930 to 1933 when we had record breaking cold winters. Actually this is the only time I remember being able to ice skate on the Delaware River. We walked along the canal to Green Hill Road to a cut above the road and then home. This stays vividly in my memory. Cold, I can still remember it. I still remember by contrast the wonderful days of walking to and from school in the nice weather. During this time frame when not in school, the canal was my playground. Most of my free time was spent fishing, and swimming or playing in general along the canal. There was another boy who was my friend who's people manned the lock near Redfield Island.

Mr. Metz: What was his name?

Mr. Carlson: Carl Heineman. He was the only kid in the area my age. He was a rotten little bastard, but that was beside the point. But there was no one else to play with so we got along. The one previously referred to was being between Center Bridge and Lumberville. His people had a row boat and one of the many things we did was to take the row boat out when a canal boat was sighted and hitch a ride as far as we wanted to go, up or down river. We would ask the barge tender to take our rope and tow us along. I can never remember being refused. Can you imagine the idyllic conditions of this ^{Huck Finn?} lifestyle? There were times however when there were no barges coming back so we started and rowed. Fishing was great, sunfish, rock fish, carp, catfish, bass, eels, giging for frogs was fun. ^{Cruel as it may seem,} Frog legs cooked over a open fire were unforgettable. There was no money in those days. We had no electricity, running water, central heat, radio, no entertainment, other than self-made; but those days I will always remember as amongst the happiest in my life. I'm so glad that finally after so many years of neglect something is being done with this historic landmark.

Mr. Metz: Thank you sir. We'll put that with the records. Its now exactly 3:00 and we're going to stop the tape and take your picture.