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(SNP085) Owen E. Lucas interviewed by Norman Taylor

Owen E. Lucas

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Norman Taylor: This is an interview with Owen Lucas for the National Park Service by Norman Taylor at the museum on August 27th at 8:30 AM. I guess the first thing that we go over with everyone is when you were born, where you grew up, and how you first came to be associated with the land that the Park is in or the Park as the case may be. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up and when you were born, that type of thing?

Owen Lucas: Yes I was born in Page County. It was 7/31/28. And that was in the Stanley area. And I didn’t become associated with the Park, I never visited the Park until my first day of employment which was 7/28/46. Never been in the Park before.

NT: You lived in Page County. Was that near the Park?

OL: Yes, that was just adjacent to the Park. Page, which lies between the Blue Ridge and Massanutten Mountains, they’re in sight distance of the Park.

NT: Can you tell me about what you remember about the people that lived in the Park and in particular, how they were similar or different from your family, how they were similar or different?
OL: I guess they were somewhat similar. Only they lived in say in the Park, which is now the Park. I don’t know of any vast differences in the type of people or I guess they were pretty much similar people.

NT: Can you tell me about what you remember if anything, about how the Park Service conducted the taking over the land and telling the people, etcetera? Do you remember anything about that? You would have been, I guess you would have been pretty young then.

OL: Yes, I don’t know of anything; only what I’ve heard, that the state of Virginia bought the land that was involved and donated to the federal government for a park. So that’s just basically the knowledge I have of it.

NT: What did your family do to make a living?

OL: My family were primary farmers, which just small farms in the Page County area and some other commercial jobs. That’s basically their livelihood.

NT: What were your parent’s names and any brothers and sisters? And did they also live here throughout their childhood?

OL: Yes my parents were born in this area and it’s five of us children, which I am the eldest. And right now I have one sister living in Maryland and one over in western Virginia, near the West Virginia line, and a brother that lives in Michigan. And of course I lived here all my life.

NT: What kinds of farming did they do?

OL: At the time I was a youngster, it was a cannery operated by a local businessman and we grew tomatoes during the summer. That was our main cash crop. And of course there were some other, corn and well corn was another major crop. Those two crops were the major crops.

NT: What do you remember how your family was involved with the community? And was there, in terms of church, in terms of if any, in terms of get-togethers or social occasions, or anything you know that involved the other people in the area.

OL: We went to church. There was a local church right in our neighborhood which I live right next door to it now. That’s the church we went to. Social gatherings were just maybe a couple families meet to you know talk over events and whatever. That was about the extent of it.

NT: Can you tell me about when you first, you mentioned your first contact with the Park was when you first started work. Can you tell me how you went about to get a job and what that was like in the beginning?

OL: Well when I first became aware that there was employment available in the Park that was immediately after World War Two. And understand that the several conscientious objector camps, they were dismantled, disbanded. And so that’s why the Park was restarting,
everything come to a standstill during the war years. And then when the war ended everything started gearing up for recreation again. And that’s the first, you know, came on to the Skyline Drive.

NT: Do you remember about how you found out about the job and what you had to do to get the job and anything about that?

OL: Yes. The employee at that time said there’s openings in the Park and so I immediately came down and had an interview. And I had an interview one week and the next week I went to work. And I worked temporarily for about, well the first winter I didn’t work regular, only when the weather was suitable. And I think on the following year well I worked straight on through and been working ever since. At that time I didn’t have much driving experience, but I started driving some of the vehicles and I got to about a year, I didn’t plow snow the first year I worked, but about a year after I started driving they started putting me on the snow plow equipment.

NT: So what did you do in that year before you were doing snow plow?

OL: During the war years, say everything came to a standstill. The brush, locusts and so forth had some places grown into where the Drive was practically closed. And for several years during the summer and when we wasn’t removing snow in the winter, just cutting back and dragging this brush back from the road shoulders. So that taken care of our work primary for several years till everything was cleared back. [unintelligible] had grown up. In fact everything had almost went to wilderness again even after fresh construction near before the war.

NT: Tell me about the snow plow plowing and how that was done in terms of back then what equipment was used and wonder what conditions it was done etcetera and things like that.

OL: They had some trucks that was ‘38, ‘39 dump trucks. They had plows mounted on ‘em. And of course after I came to work, some military trucks became available, the surplus after the war. And we [unintelligible] our four wheel drives, some of ‘em were six-by-sixes and then they had V-plows mounted on say the six-by-sixes and just the straight blades on the regular dump trucks. And sometimes the conditions that we plowed snow under were you now quite severe. We encountered fog and sometimes it was almost what they call a whiteout, snow and fog together. Fortunately all the years I plowed snow I never had no accidents, plowing which is I guess a lot contributed to luck. I remember one time going in Big Meadows, course that was after night and I knew exactly the road and everything was pictured right in my mind and I steered what I thought was the roadway. I steered in the right direction, but I ran off the shoulder about three times before I got to the entrance there at the Big Meadows. As I have to run out of woods. Drive by the treetops and vegetation alongside the road that you’re familiar with. That’s how bad it could get at times.

NT: How did that kind of work differ from what you know about it and was it any different back then in terms of the way they did it, or when they did it, or when they closed the Drive, back then than it was now?
OL: It’s somewhat different now. It was concluded during later years, mid years as I worked at plowing the snow of a night or when the conditions were that severe that you just wasn’t accomplishing anything. If it wasn’t no one’s life in jeopardy, well best let it go till daytime. You sort of spinning your wheels. You go at a snail’s pace pushing, that’s not very good. And if you would happen to slip off the road or something it just complicates the matters. It was finally determined that it wouldn’t be any snow plowing at night.

NT: In the beginning they did have snow plowing at night?

OL: Yeah. It was some of it. It wasn’t you know on a regular basis, but wanted to get the road open say pretty quick, well if the supervisor made the decision to plow it, they had to plow it.

NT: What reasons would they have to want to get it open quick?

OL: Well say for instance there’d be something would happen the next day that you wanted to get the road cleared as quickly as possible. And that was usually you know happened occasionally, but not very often.

NT: How long were you involved with the snow plowing and how did you come about to change to a different, how did the change come about because I know eventually you changed over to something else?

OL: I changed over yeah, to district supervisor. Let’s see, in fact I made a run on, we had about a thirty-inch snow fall I guess it was probably in ’82 that I made a run. Sent everybody else home, but there was a couple rangers involved. The north district crew were stuck on the other side of Hogback and I sent all my crew on the way home and drove the plow myself. I was more familiar with the north district roads than anybody. I reckon ’82 was the last year.

NT: So what happened that day that you drove up there?

OL: The largest truck they had was the only one they could get through with. The north district’s trucks were stuck. It was on the other side of Hogback and so at Panorama I got in the big truck and sent our crew home. So I went to get ‘em out. I got ‘em out about I guess four o’clock in the evening or maybe a little later. So it came on back into Piney River, and filled up, got everybody together that was involved in that district and headed out. And I was going home, that was I guess about eight o’clock. Then we got a call over the radio that the crew that was sent home about ten o’clock were stuck up Lucas Hollow. So that’s where I headed. They were off the road. I plowed into ‘em. There were four by fours stuck, I had more problems after I got down in civilization than I had all day up on the Drive. They’d compacted snow, four wheelers, tractors, all this stuff and—. So I think after I got ‘em out and I was within about two miles of home after I got everybody plowed out and it was about ten o’clock when I called my supervisor told him I was shuttin’ down for the night. That was at home.

NT: This was in a storm in ’82?
OL: Yeah.

NT: You say it was thirty-inch?

OL: Yeah it was about a thirty-inch snowfall. That was just a little above average. Well quite a bit above average to be specific.

NT: Do you remember about when that might have been? I’m sure that there’s a record of it if it was that big.

OL: Yeah, I’m sure it is, too. I don’t know exactly which month it was. It was during one of those spring months, say March, February or March. I don’t know which.

NT: How did you come about to become, can you tell me about your becoming district supervisor and what that meant? You said you became at ’82 you became district supervisor, is that right?

OL: No. That was district supervisor was I believe March 1970.

NT: Okay. When you were in the winter, when you were plowing snow, what were you doing mostly in the summer and what was that like?

OL: Well after I became district supervisor we did quite a bit of winterizing some buildings primarily in the Big Meadows area when we wasn’t involved in snow plowing. You know some other activity when the weather got down pretty severe and the cold, we worked inside redoing the buildings and maybe painting, paint the buildings inside. You know something that was beneficial and caring for the buildings and so forth.

NT: In ’82 how did you come about to stop the snow plowing and what did you do after that? I’m sorry I got mixed up because you said you became district supervisor in about what year?

OL: About 1969 or ’70. I don’t recall the exact year.

NT: Right. And how did that come about?

OL: The previous supervisor retired and then I was promoted into his position. Just I promoted into his position. I didn’t file any applications for it or whatever, but just promoted was into it

NT: And how did your job change when that happened?

OL: Well it was more responsibilities. Of course I had some ideas as to things I might want to improve. Along with my supervisor, I think we had an excellent working relationship.

NT: Who was your supervisor?
OL: Rodney Lowe, he became a supervisor when I was promoted. And then about six years later, Dale Holt became my supervisor. He was my immediate supervisor until he retired in 1984.

NT: Can you tell me about the improvements that you and your supervisor made when you became district manager? What kinds of things you might have—

OL: I think one of the major things we did was we reorganized the setup of the garbage pickup in the Big Meadows campground. What we did, the trash cans were strung out through the camp sites. The employees had problems with the pets that the campers kept. In fact some of ‘em got nipped occasionally. So we clustered the trash cans along the roadside and well that reduced the workload probably sixty, seventy percent, instead of going back in the brush and bringing everything out. During those years we had [unintelligible] from pipe that was originally laid during the construction of the Drive and roads and we replaced quite a lot of those old fire roads and well the areas which had rusted out—

NT: Pipes?

OL: Yeah. Road drainage pipe. And some of us during the original construction were, there were two small, sometimes there’d be a cluster, a small pipe, and then when the water got up first thing came down a stick blew out, stopped up the whole works. So we went to a larger pipe and sometimes even a single pipe. So that eliminated a lot of problems with the pipe becoming stopped up during the storms. And we also was doing improvements to the grounds over the years in order to maintain it so their mowers could get over it more efficiently and so forth.

NT: In terms of, how would you do that?

OL: Improve the grounds?

NT: Yeah.

OL: Well it may be some rock outcroppings or stumps with some grass growing up around it the operator couldn’t see so those were removed you know during times when the say fall or early spring. We had a lot of dead trees that died annually and we’d have to go along the roadside and cut those before they fell out in the road and caused a problem. And then watching those. All this is something that you can’t take a scratch pad and fill it up, things that need to be done. I know the priority to take over, there’d still be some things on me. Scratch pad, we wanna do those later, but priority ruled some of ‘em out.

NT: You mentioned that they had trouble with the pets and getting bit. Can you mention sometimes that the workers would get bit by the pets? Can you tell me about how you saw the people who used the park, how they were back in the early times and how that might have changed in your opinion? In terms of the way they used the Park, in terms of things they brought to the Park and stuff like that.
OL: If I remember correctly, when I first went to work for the Park, a lot of the folks were driving through. Over the years as the campground’s developed we’ve had more and more overnight stays and eventually it was a two-week time limit set for each individual camper. You had increased, as time went on stuff of driving through, they came to spend more and more time. The trails were improved and the Park encouraged the visitor to get out of their vehicles and go into the backwoods only if it wasn’t for only five minutes. So visitor use increased and the total amount of visitors vastly increased. I can remember when per year it was less than a million visitors and then it went to a point where it was slightly over two million. Visitation really increased.

NT: Did the things that people brought to the Park change in terms of, that you remember or anything like that? You said that they had more overnight stays as opposed to just driving through and that they brought their pets a lot of times.

OL: Yes. The camping equipment improved and companies started providing more sophisticated camping equipment. Visitor use also, camping also increased. When they didn’t leave too many of their comforts at home, well overnight length of stays expanded the length of the map.

NT: In terms of the people who controlled the Park and how the Park worked, how did that, back in the early times of your employment, how was that different through the years?

OL: Well personnel increased vastly up to today. I can remember when there was only one naturalist in the Park. So personnel to doing interpretation, visitor protection and so forth, that increased over the years. And techniques also improved. You got one time, there was no medical people, technicians in the Park so we got medical EMT’s that were trained and rescue units. Whenever an accident occurred, well instead of someone coming out of the Valley there were someone on scene pretty quickly. So everything geared up for visitor use and protection over the years. Right now I’m not sure of whether there’s been any changes since I’ve retired or not, but it was getting where it was about as good as a city would have here in the Park.

NT: When you first started working, how would they handle an accident?

OL: A ranger would go immediately to the accident and lots of times he would have to call the rescue unit out of the Valley, but today they got the units scattered over the Drive. There could be someone on the scene now, personnel almost immediately. So that vastly improved. The only difficulty now is the time involved I guess, say someone get hurt in the backcountry, several miles from the roadway or whatever. It still takes time to get in. But after they get the victim stabilized it could be a possibility that they could, get a helicopter landing zone not too far from where the victim is.

NT: Over the years how did maintenance change? In terms of what you did, what you had to work with, what just change in general from the early time of your employment that you recall?
OL: Some of the procedures still remain about the same. Of course the equipment has changed. Sometimes in the olden days you didn’t have that specialized equipment which became more specialized throughout the years.

NT: For example?

OL: One example is trail equipment. That’s vastly improved. Smaller tractors that’s adaptable to a small operation. Material transportation motorized. Where it used to be just wheel barrow work, now it’s specialized equipment, small front-end loaders and the like equipment, small backhoes for small equipment which is a lot better than old the shovel and pick method.

NT: What areas of maintenance, were you responsible for all areas of maintenance as district supervisor? What types of maintenance were you responsible for?

OL: I was responsible for the maintenance in the district. But I worked in the central district, so I was responsible for maintenance in the district. Of course the Park works with the Appalachian Trail Club. They send folks in on different maintenance aspects. And of course if it gets too severe for them well then we get involved. It’s whatever the priority is, that’s what’s to be done, how much we get involved.

NT: The techniques for trails and other things, how has that changed from early days, if it has changed at all?

OL: Basically it hasn’t changed much. The backcountry trail is just a minimum amount of work for leveling. A lot of it, the terrain is tough. There’s not much you can do to improve it. But wherever that it can be drained to get the water off to create further erosion, well that’s just about the extent of it. It hasn’t changed very much in the backcountry. Still pack in and pack out. Make what the material is available, use that and that’s it. Natural materials is all we used.

NT: So you would use the materials that were at hand. Is that what, why was that?

OL: Well it’d be impractical to bring material in from any other source. It’s just out of the question. Accessibility is just always impossible in some places. It might be a matter of just moving a rock outcropping or rerouting a trail around impossible terrain that is hard to negotiate.

NT: You said “pack in.” So you would carry all your supplies and lunches, you’d carry everything with you that you needed.

OL: Right. Tools that were needed to do a specific job, they were carried in. Wherever they weren’t bogged down at lunch time, well they ate their lunches there. Sometimes you’d backtrack or if it was getting closer to a takeout point, well someone else would bring a vehicle around and pick the crew up.
NT: Did you usually just work for one day or would sometimes you work overnight or how did that work?

OL: Most of it was just daily work and some of the trails involved, take a couple weeks to repair ‘em. I think after I retired it was some trail crews that done contract work, I don’t know any specifics about that, but I understand that they were under contract to do trail work.

NT: Whereabouts did you live during the whole—. You told me where you were born. Whereabouts did you live during the period? And I also wanted to ask you about how retirement and all went.

OL: Retirement, I’ve been very well satisfied with it. Oh, I miss some aspects of the work, but I’ve been real well satisfied with retirement.

NT: In terms of the Park Service, what did they do in terms of retirement? Do you do anything involved with the Park Service anymore or with the people? Is there any connection in retirement with the Park Service?

OL: All retirees get together about every three months. Well we have our jam sessions and well we meet everybody we knew and worked with. I still see some of the workers occasionally. I come out to the service station to get a paper each morning and I bump into ‘em if I’m there at the right time. I usually go up twice a year, drive through the district, and then look at what’s going on. Talk to some of the workers. Right now the supervisor that was under me is the district supervisor. I talk to him occasionally. So I do well keep up to date on what’s happening.

NT: How do the get togethers go? You said every three months they get together. How does that work?

OL: What do you mean? What activities—

NT: Where do you get together? What do you do? I mean you just told me what you did basically. But who organizes it and if anybody?

OL: Yes, a couple of the retirees make arrangements with the restaurant. Then give everybody a call when the meeting date is. So everybody can make it, gets together.

NT: Who gets together? Is it all employees or is it just certain groups?

OL: Just the retirees, the ones that can make it on that specific date. Out of forty or so employees, usually around eighteen, twenty people get together each time. It’s a few of ‘em deceased now. From the time it started, oh I guess lost probably four or five.

NT: Does that include just maintenance or other areas?

OL: That includes all retirees.
NT: So the relationship between the different departments throughout time, between maintenance and other, I don’t know the department names or anything, but was there anything about that that you remember?

OL: I think all the departments got along pretty good. Of course I guess all employees are kind of like myself, we were here for one specific purpose and that was to serve the public. As far as I was concerned it was a hand in glove situation. Taking everybody’s talents and abilities and be able to work together to produce that type of environment which I think is a very good working relationship between all departments. I know myself, whenever I’d call on another department I got full cooperation. Sometimes we differed in our methods. The office can’t you know come to a conclusion, what was to be done? Which I think was, most of the time was a mutual agreement.

NT: Going back, was there anything about this area of the country that you saw was different than other, I don’t know how much you got out of this area, but were there things in this area that you saw were different than in other areas?

OL: Well basically this is home to me. And of course I never did travel too much, but after a few days, I wanted to get back to what I call my broad patch. I guess other folks has got probably the same feeling. So that’s about the extent of it.

NT: Okay. During the years, in terms of social things in the Park Service, did they do things much socially during the years in terms of celebrations, mourning deaths? Or just socially in the Park Service, did they do things together or did they have any you know rituals or traditions that they did in terms of your work that you recall back when you first started as opposed to now or was there any you know anything like that that you recall?

OL: Over the years Employee’s Association developed which they had annual picnics, Christmas parties, and other social events. Also retirement parties for the ones that retired, things of that nature. Of course employees, if there’d be a death in the employee’s family, Employee Association would you know send flowers or supper over. A lot of employees would you know attend funerals and such as that. It was sort of a family oriented group.

NT: Now during, you became district manager in ’62 and you were district manager all the way up till your retirement, is that right?

OL: Yeah, let’s see it was ’70, ’69 or ’70 I became district supervisor and up till ’84, yeah I was district supervisor.

NT: Did that job change much through the years?

OL: Not a whole great deal. No basically it didn’t change too much.

NT: What things did change?
OL: Well our way of, we had certain things which was more or less annual and seasonal, job functions that had to be performed. Only thing that really changed was maybe some of the equipment and so forth that we used. The basic manner, the functions didn’t change that much.

NT: And how did you come about to decide to retire?

OL: Well age wise, I was eligible. But I did work a year longer than I would have had to work. I was having some problems you know with family and personnel problems and both of ‘em, well I’ll just get rid of one. So that’s what I did.

NT: Okay. Well I guess I want to thank you for coming in. I appreciate it. And it’s 9:35 and I am concluding the interview on August 27th.

[tape break, 00:59:37]

NT: Continuing the interview, okay.

OL: The only thing I can say in summation that I really like this area and the type of work I did and if I had to do it over, well I’d do it again. [unintelligible] That’s about it.

NT: Okay, thank you.

OL: Yeah, you’re welcome.

[End audio file, 01:00:08 min.]

End of Interview