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Tape Index Sheet

General Topic of Interview:

Date: 1/20/97

Place: Durham, NC

Length: 50 mins

Personal Data:

Narrator

Name Dillard Teer

Address 43 Beverly Dr  
Durham, NC 27707

Birthplace Durham, NC

Birthdate 5-12-20

Occupations(s) Contractor

Interviewer

Name Julie Mullis

Address 1489-1 Brown's  
Chapel Rd. Boone, NC 28607

Title: Park Ranger

What was the occasion of the interview?

Oral History Project

Interview Data:

Side 1

Side 2

Estimated time on tape:

Subjects covered, in approximate order (please spell out names of persons & places mentioned)

1500	Background, father's background.	Nello L. Teer, Sr.
1503	1st BRP Contract, Cumberland Knob	Ickes
1506	Gillespie Gap 1938-40	Timekeeper
1509	Contractor Camps	mt Mitchell, Glendale Springs
1510	Road construction methods	Cataloochee
1515	Timekeepers, wages, contract workers	Junaluska
1518	Asterville watershed problems	Ted Pease
1520	Trees and Land	Aho to Bamboo
1524	Linville Bridge 1940	Louis Thora
1528	Tunnel building	

Use back of sheet if necessary

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Side II

1532 - Teer Construction

1534 equipment

1535 - present parkway impressions

1542 - worst experience - brother's death

1545 - moon shining

1548 - parkway politics

1552 - showing of pictures

SIDE ONE

JM: This is an interview with Dillard Teer. Um, Dillard, I'm going to start by asking you just a few basic questions.

DT: That'd be fine.

JM: Number one, when is your birthday?

DT: My birthdate?

JM: M-hm.

DT: May the twelfth, 1920.

JM: OK. And where were you born at?

DT: In Durham.

JM: OK, so you're still here.

DT: (Laughs) Yeah.

JM: I know your father owned the contract company that began construction on the Parkway. And you yourself worked for the Parkway too. Can you tell me the three areas that you worked--

DT: Well let's back up a little bit. My father, who was Nello L. Teer, Senior, he lost his right hand when he was seventeen years old, workin' in his father's brickyard. A brick machine cut his right hand off. And uh, 'course he was just seventeen years old, and that was back in nineteen somethin', two or three. And uh, they didn't sew it back on like they do now. But uh, he didn't have any education. He rented two mules and a wagon and a dragpan and started buildin' streets in Durham, and diggin' basements, and foundations, for <sup>buildings and</sup> things in Durham. And one of the things he built was Mr. Duke's mansion, did the landscapin', and the gradin' all around. And then they did three or four more, right close by. Uh, in 1925, I guess it was, Duke University was beginning to build, this was called the East Campus, not the West Campus. And Mr. Duke was a good friend of his, and he got, Mr. Duke put him to work out there. No contract, just had him go out there and do it. So he started buildin' the streets and foundations of the Duke campus.

JM: With one hand, or two?

DT: Well, he had, he worked with one hand. And, 'course he had, I guess, some laborers that helped him. But he could do it all with one hand, and did it. In fact he's told me many times, he didn't understand why he had to have two hands, he didn't need but one. (Laughs) But uh, one thing lead to another, and over the period of the 20s and 30s, he got to be a real large contractor. Buildin' roads in three or four states at that time. For the state highway department. And the Blue Ridge Parkway came along, and as you probably know from your own history, that Mr. Roosevelt, had decided that he was goin' a, and Mr. Ickes, decided they were goin' a help out the Appalachain area of North Carolina, they were so poor, they were, actually, as you know, they were dirt poor. Some of 'em didn't even have heat in their houses, except for an old stove, and half it didn't work. So when 1934 came along, it started in 1933 plannin', and in 1934 it passed Congress and they got the first funds. And I don't know what it was, it was somewhere, six or eight ~~m~~million dollars, to start it. And uh, my father got the first contract that was let. On the Blue Ridge Parkway, and for the world of me I can't tell you where it is--

JM: I think Cumberland KNoB was the first place--

DT: Cumberland Knob, OK, well, I didn't remember that. And from then on he worked constantly on the Blue Ridge Parkway. 'Course he had other jobs goin' too, but he worked constantly on the Blue Ridge Parkway. AND uh,



DT: (Continued) from 1935 on up until the wartime. And as you know also, from history, that the Parkway was built between '35 and '41. And it was shut down in '41, due to the war. And immediately after World War Two, they cranked it up again, and my father was back in, doin' work. In fact, the one at Mount Mitchell that you saw just a while ago, that was one of the first contracts let after World War Two. And from then on, it was a sort of hopscotch, because all the contracts weren't let one by one, it was one here and one there, and one here and one there, and there was a reason for that. The reason was to put more of those people to work. And in fact, that was the object of the whole thing, is to put people to work. And of course the CCC boys were out there, and they were building fire trail roads. They weren't buildin' highways, they built fire trails in the mountains, and they did an excellent job. And they came on to, I guess, the last job that my father had, must've been around, let's see, I'll say in the 'fifties, I've forgotten the actual date, but I do remember that it was some time in the 'fifties. In the 'thirties, when I was just eighteen years old, I worked on two or three sections of the Parkway, and I made visitations, many times with my father, lookin' at the projects. And he uh, in other words he built, I'm gonna say prob'ly, half or two thirds of all the Parkway in North Carolina, he built. He also built some of the Skyline Drive in Virginia. Around Front Royal, down around Waynesboro. And on down into the South of that. To uh, I can't think of the name of that town.

JM: Luray, maybe?

DT: Hm?

JM: Luray?

DT: Well, through Luray, yeah, we built a road there too, but the one I was tryin' to think of was one of the last jobs he had in North Carolina. It was uh, over near Glendale Springs. And that's just above West Jefferson.

JM: Right, like Doughton Park, and Sparta?

DT: Doughton Park, see he built that section in there too, yeah. So it went on, up into the last section was built in what, 'sixty, 'sixty two or three, wasn't it?

JM: Except for the viaduct section.

DT: Yeah, where the viaduct is.

JM: And that wasn't until the 'eighties.

DT: And, until the 'eighties, yeah. I never visited that job but one time, of course that was a beautiful section that, I always wondered how much it really meant to the Parkway, because, what is it, 2500 feet long? And uh, that's a lot of money for 2500 feet of road. But it's beautiful, and it does what they set out to do, not to disturb the environment. But I lived in uh, Gillespie Gap, as I told you earlier. And I lived in a wooden office building, we built that right at the gap. And uh, I had no way to cook, so I had to go down the mountain, either way towards Burnsville, down toward Little Switzerland, to find me somethin' to eat. Plenty to eat, I always had to go find it. But his background is most amazing. What you can do, it's a pretty good story of what a person can do, whether it's now, or sixty, seventy years ago when he did it. We call 'em entrepreneurs, now, because they-- and every day you read somethin' about "So-and-so came from a poor town here and a poor town there," and all of a sudden, by hard work and good luck he's made millions of dollars in his product that he's sellin'. And that's the American Way. I sometimes wish that we could get our country movin' that way again. 'Course this country now, I think everybody understands, we couldn't survive if we didn't



DT: (Continued) have foreign trade. There's no way in the world that we could subsidize the farmers and all kinds of crops and everything, if we didn't sell it overseas. And when we put the allotments on tobacco, and other things, then that helped a whole lot, and of course the government was buyin' cotton at one price and sellin' it for a whole lot less to keep the farmers, the farmers goin'.

JM: We have the corporations now, and that makes a difference.

DT: Yeah. And everything's gotten so big, I don't think things are so personal as they used to be. But my father, at one time, had almost 600 head of mules and horses. And <sup>when</sup> he started buildin' these county roads all over North Carolina, ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> was workin' about seven or eight hundred men. The majority of which were black. And he built camps for the blacks to live in, and he had cooks in there, and he had ~~(in distinguishable)~~ commissaries, and the men that lived there. And, that's nothin' unique, because, most all the contractors in that area were doin' the same thing.

JM: Did he have such camps on the Blue Ridge Parkway?

DT: Oh yeah. We had a camp at uh, Mount Mitchell. And it was about <sup>6 or 7</sup> ~~9~~ two-bedroom cottages, heated by an old stove in the corner.

JM: Was it up on the mountain?

DT: Yeah, on the mountain. Right up there, where we had it is now a turn-off. And most of those turn-offs you see up there are overlooks, where one time either a shop for the equipment, or we had a camp there. And most all the contractors had-- 'course it was, it was uh, you just couldn't drive from Marion up there and back every day. Some of our men did,--

JM: Did that camp have a name to it?

DT: No. Not that I remember.

JM: Was there another one at Galax?

DT: Well that's the name that I was just tryin' to think of. Galax. No, we bought a hotel there. The Glendale Springs hotel at Galax. Down below Galax. And it was a nice old big factory that's in operation right now. It's called the Glendale Springs Hotel, I got a letter from a man the other day, wantin' to interview me, and what I did with it, I got it here somewhere. And he housed his superintendents and his foremans, and he hired local girls to do the cookin' and the maid service, and uh, built a wing onto the North Side of it, for offices in the engineering department. At that time, he had I guess five contracts right in the Galax area.

JM: Was it all pertaining to the Parkway?

DT: All of it pertaining to the Parkway, yes. Yeah. Uh,--

JM: So that was all strictly road-building? Or were there other projects?

DT: All road building, yeah. Back in those last contracts, there, we were not only doin' the gradin', we were doin' the crush stone work and the, what you and I call the asphalt road, but then they were bichman. <sup>(?)</sup> You took big rock, and you put the raw bichman, which is asphalt, into that, and then you sprayed it, and then you put another coat of dust, rock dust on it. And that's the first thing that was built on the Parkway, the first roads. And that's why that held up so good. I don't know how many times you been up and down the Parkway, but you don't find many places that'll fail you. There might be an exception, but that's because it was built right to start with.

JM: Do you remember a black camp, either a CCC camp, or a camp of some sort, around Galax? We have a record of it but a lot of people I've mentioned it to don't know about it.



DT: The only CC Camp that I really remember definitely where it was, is over at Cataloochee. Mister, whatever his name is, Alexander, who owns Cataloochee Ranch. I was a boy, 15 years old, down at Lake Junaluska, when they had the uh, polio epidemic. And they moved us up to Cataloochee Mountain, and we had a couple buildings there, and that's where we were. But the CCC boys were workin' there at that time, 'cause I was tellin' you, buildin' fire trails, fire roads. And, don't many people really know that, but there's hundreds and hundreds of miles of fire roads.

JM: In the National Forest, especially.

DT: Yeah. I remember the first time I went to Mount Mitchell. I didn't wanna go to Marion and then come up the back way. I saw a sign that said Mount Mitchell. I turned left, and I was right just out of Black Mountain. And I went up a wagon road all the way to Mount Mitchell in my car. You couldn't turn around, you couldn't back up. I had nowhere to go but go. And fortunately, there was no slides or anything like that, and I made it, but it was pretty rough. Pretty rough.

JM: Do you remember when you were up there, getting to know any local people?

DT: Uh, let's see if I can remember. Not really, because most of the local people we had then were merchants, in Spruce Pine, that we bought supplies from, dynamite supplies and drill steel, and stuff of that type. And we got acquainted with all the local people, Mission Distributing Company comes to mind, got its start in Spruce Pine. It was a hardware store. But most of the time, in most of the areas, we were so far from the towns and villages, that you were 35 or 40 miles-- I remember <sup>when</sup> we built Beech Mountain, which is out of Waynesville, those men had to drive 30 miles a day, to and from work. And they did. See, they never had a chance to get, to know the local people, 'cause they worked seven days a week. (Laughs) I don't remember really any particular names. I know some names in Waynesville, but they were pretty remote areas. You can imagine that some 60--some years ago.

JM: Tell me about the people you physically worked with, when you were actually working on the Parkway. Were any of them locals, or did they--

DT: Oh yes, I think I was, I was a timekeeper, on the job at Gillespie Gap, and we paid the men in cash, that's the way the government wanted to, so, they wanted to get that money circulatin'. And in order to spread the money out further, we had to run two shifts. Two six-hour shifts. Which made that many more people get a job. And I used to-- I can remember right now, I can see the time cards, they'd turn 'em out to me, and I'd fill 'em out and I'd send 'em to Durham. And we always paid off a week late, 'cause of the time gettin' it to and from the mountains, to and from Durham, and in cash, especially, took a week's time. But I can remember, the average wage that I was puttin' money in the envelope, was sixteen dollars and fifty cents a week. And some people never seen anything like that before. That was great money to them.

JM: Whas this in the '30s or was this in the '40s.

DT: Uh, no, that was in uh, '38. '38. And some of those mountaineers, 'course they didn't have cars. And some of those people walked fifteen miles a day to get to work.

JM: Was there any kind of a chauffeur service, or they just had to get there?

DT: No. They just had to get there. What finally happened, uh, some of our people, who were the supervisory personnel, they would pick 'em up, they'd jump on the pick-up, and they'd take 'em to work, and they'd take 'em back home too. <sup>But</sup> They were there. And I remember very well, somebody said to me one time, I was at Gillespie Gap, he said, "Well, suppose these men don't wanna work? What do you do?" And I said, "Look up there." And up onto of that ridge there, there's about thirty men up there, waitin'



DT: (Continued) to get a job. (Laughs)

JM: What were some of the jobs that you and the men did?

DT: Well, 'course, outside of bein' timekeeper, what we did was, we'd get a section, I'm gonna say, there at Gillespie Gap, 2L1 went towards Asheville, and 2L2 went this way. Or vice versa, I've forgotten which. And of course, , when you build a road, the first thing you do is, after the government has staked it out, and laid it out, there had to be a master plan. The first thing we would do is go in there with about fifty or sixty laborers and cut the trees down, in the right-of-way. And of course, once you get the trees down, you gotta get 'em out of there. So that made that many more people work. And after you got the trees out, you get the bulldozers in there, and start takin' stumps out. And we had to take all the stumps out there. We had some stumps there, stump piles that burned three, four months, so many of 'em in there. And after you got the stumps out, you bring in the heavy equipment, and you move whatever you could without dynamite. Of course, almost all the jobs it was all rock. And you'd have two drill crews. You'd have a drill crew takin' it down to one level, and then back up behind is another crew takin' it down to the last level. You drilled the rock, and you shot it, and you moved your, everybody calls 'em steam shovels, but by that time they were diesel shovels. You move your shovels in, and your big earth movin' equipment, and you haul it out of the cuts, and start your fills, and you got this cut down, this fill up, next cut down, this fill up. And finally you got to the other end. And either you started, or somebody else started the same thing over. Road buildin' wasn't complicated. I think the most complicated section we ever had was at Mount Mitchell, which is, that's when we went through the Asheville Watershed. And we uh, our men couldn't go to the bathroom. And we had what they called outhouses, of course, up and down there. And then we had a crew they called the uh, the honey wagon, they're the ones that went along and emptied the (laughs) the things out. But I asked this Blue Ridge Parkway man that was in charge of the landscapin'. I said, "Why can't our men go the bathroom?"

JM: Was his name Ted Pease, by chance?

DT: Huh?

JM: Ted Pease, by chance?

DT: No, his name was... he was a right-of-way man, for the Parkway place, the not right-of-way, landscape man. I never heard of a landscape till that got started. But they marked every tree. And if you knocked down a tree, boy they'd raise Cain with you. And nobody realized, everybody thinks environmentalists and all that stuff is new. Heck, it was back in the road-buildin' business sixty, seventy years ago.

JM: I interviewed a fellow named Ted Pease who was a landscape fellow in that area for a while, and he got arrested, for walkin' through there, doin' his job, as a government official. They put him in jail and the head of the Parkway had to call to get him out of jail.

DT: We never did have anybody arrested ~~that~~ I remember. But the Parkway people actually would hide in the woods. And what they call patrol. And they patrolled a certain area, and they were lookin' just for somebody to keep them from goin' to the bathroom on the ground. I asked this man, <sup>one</sup> ~~some~~ time, how do they know the difference between a man and a bear? And he says, "We don't." (Laughs) He says, "You can tell down in Asheville." And I says, "Oh, don't hand me that stuff. I don't think it's true." But anyhow, that's the only section that I remember, the Asheville Watershed, that we had to do that. We didn't do it on any other areas.



JM: Did you ever meet a man named Stanley Abbott, or Ed Abbuehl?

DT: I don't know those names, no.

JM: They were both in landscaping too, I thought maybe you ran into them. How big were the trees?

DT: Oh, mammoth trees. They were 30 inches in circumference, and 30 and 40 feet high.

JM: What did you all do with the wood. Did you all ever build things with it, or somebody else just took the--

DT: You mean the logs?

JM: M-hm.

DT: Oh, no, we had log contractors that came in. Back in those days, we burned most of it. We didn't have the equipment all the time to-- If a man came in there and said he wanted it we said "Alright, we'll give you the next week to get it out." We couldn't wait for him to take out a log or two at a time. And as I told you, we burnt the stumps and we also burnt the logs. THous-ands and thousands of cords of wood, we burned on the Parkway.

JM: What was the land like? I've heard some reports saying that the land was pretty much eroded, and a lot of it had been over-timbered, and a lot of fires. Did you notice that?

DT: No. No. Most of the damage had been done by the, what's the tree that--

JM: The Chestnut?

DT: Yeah, the Chestnut blight. But most of that was West of Asheville. They didn't have much of it East of Asheville. The Chestnut blight was just comin' into its full being in the early '30s, mid-'30s. I didn't see anything unusual. 'Course a lot of those poor people livin' in there, 'bout the only way they had to make a living was to cut up some wood and take it to town and sell it. And of course they had to have a wagon, or an old beat up truck or somethin' to get it there.

JM: Have you ever heard of the Crest of the Blue Ridge? This was an early attempt to build somethin' like the Parkway, before 1915. And I understand that a little bit of the Parkway, right around the Spruce Pine and Linville Falls area, actually followed that original roadbed.

DT: I don't know that.

JM: I don't know if you remembered anything about that.

DT: I've stayed up there three, three, three summers. And I pretty well <sup>knew</sup> ~~viewed~~ those mountains from one end to the other. And I, I never saw that.

JM: OK. Probably it was grown over, by then, because that was a number of years that we--

DT: Well I drove, I told you, I took right out of Black Mountain, and went up to Mount Mitchell, that was an old loggin' road. How they ever got anything up and down it, I don't know, (laughs) but they did.

JM: Do you remember the Camp at Buck Creek Gap?

DT: Buck Creek Gap? Yeah. I don't know exactly where it was, or what station it was in, but we built Buck Creek Gap before we built Mount Mitchell. In fact we had to, to get to it. And uh, I wasn't on that particular project, my father built the road, but I wasn't active on that particular section. But they had a camp, I don't know where it was.

JM: OK. What about Linville Falls? Were you--

DT: Yeah, we started over at Linville Falls, we always had a place called Aho to Bamboo. (Laughs) And uh, yeah, we did all the sections in there. Fact of the matter, when we get through here, I'll take you out on the porch, and I'll show you a lot of equipment pictures that--

JM: I'd like to see that, that would be great. I live right off of Aho and Bamboo, right now.



DT: M-hm. Yeah, Linville Falls, and all along that area was to me, some of the prettiest part of the Parkway.

JM: Did you walk out to the Falls ever?

DT: No. Yes we did, yes we did. I wasn't over there, but we did.

JM: Do you know that very big bridge that goes over the Linville River?

DT: Yeah.

JM: Did you have anything to do with that?

DT: No, we didn't have anything to do with the bridge.

JM: Was that before, or that came after you worked there?

DT: Well, it was uh, it was started, but 'course, you had to find, to get the bridge started, and then you bring your equipment in from both sides. And eventually they meet. And, but if I remember correctly, the bridge was started some six or eight months before we got in there with heavy equipment. And back when they built bridges in those days, you didn't have all this heavy equipment, and cranes and so forth like they have now, you had a bunch of men, what they called a genpole, that reached out, picked up a rock and put it over here. But everything was handmade. Those bridges are handmade.

JM: About what year was that?

DT: That was uh, (pause) I think it was probably uh... I was old enough to drive, 'cause I drove some trucks up there one time. I'm gonna say that was '39, or '40. Some long where in there.

JM: I think that's a beautiful bridge.

DT: Yeah.

JM: Would they have laid-- so how would they have put the stones into the bridge?

DT: Man-strength and awkwardness. (Laughs) They didn't have any cranes, as I just said. And after they went in there with picks and shovels, and an air compressor, they did have air compressors, and drilled the rock out, and got to where you can put the abutments in and the footings, in the bridge, and that was all done by hand. They had a little old two-batch cement mixer, and they'd get the sand out of the creeks, to go in the cement, to make the concrete. And it was just hard labor, and they built it enough so they got, to build it of course they put that stone in there. And those stone masons came from Duke. When they were building Duke, they brought 'em over here from Italy. Forty or fifty of 'em, I have a letter here from one of their wives, who is, oh she must be ninety-some years old. And his name was Louis Thora. And they brought 'em all over here to build DUKE University. And by the time they finished Duke, the Blue Ridge Parkway started. So it was a natural thing to move these Italians up to do the rock facing on the bridges. Now they didn't build the bridges, they only put the rock facing in.

JM: OK. Were they hired by the contractors?

DT: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Bridge contractors. Now, 'course some of the jobs that we had, we had the bridge contract, but we subbed it out to a bridge builder. We weren't, at that time, in the bridge buildin' business.

JM: OK. We were thinkin' about putting an interpretive sign at that bridge, but we don't have the information you just gave us. So that's great. (Laughs) It's exciting. Can you remember any other bridge projects?

DT: Let's see, um. (Pause) Well, of course we had a lot of bridges, as far as that goes, and a lot of culverts. Culverts go down to the bottom of the fills. I don't remember anything exceptional about it. The tunnel work fascinated me more than anything else. You start talking about, Asheville up to Pisgah Inn, is what, 18 tunnels? (Laughs) And, 'course those tunnels,



- DT: (Continued) they were slow work. And, we had to build the road up to, what they called the mouth of the tunnel, ~~so~~<sup>before</sup> they could get in there and start drilling out the tunnel. That one at the Devil's Court House, was, oh 'bout eight or nine hundred feet, I think. And I saw that one built from start to scratch.
- JM: They used a lot of dynamite, and then had to prop up what they dynamited, and then cover it? *Was that how it worked?*
- DT: Oh no, we didn't cover it. No, only time you ever covered dynamite is when you're workin' on a urban area, or in towns, or in the edge of town. Up there, you had to be, they had to have skilled people that knew how far to drill. And you had to be skilled enough to know how much dynamite to put in there, and how many caps to put in there with the dynamite, to explode it. So they were all controlled explosions. There wasn't any wild blowin' up, blowin' all sides. Of course, the federal government didn't want you to hurt those trees. And I saw, a rock one time, at Devil's Court House, as big as my automobile, and it came out, which is unusual, in that size. And it rolled down the mountain, and I heard it for ten minutes. Just knockin' down trees left and right. They didn't like it, but there wasn't anything we could do about it. It was just a freak accident as far as the dynamite was concerned.
- JM: So the regulations for the Parkway were a lot stricter than other projects?
- DT: Oh yes, yes. That's where the government was finally gettin' into controllin' the environment, noise levels, and things of that kind. Yeah, that was --
- JM: I'm gonna flip the tape over. (END OF SIDE ONE)

SIDE TWO

- JM: Did you become a contractor yourself, after your years on the Parkway?
- DT: Well my brother and I both went to work for my father. He went to work in 1937, and I went to work for him in 1941.
- JM: What's your brother's name?
- DT: Nello L. Teer, Junior. (Laughs) He's a Junior. He's dead, he died last year. And uh, he went on to be President of the American Roadbuilders Association, and International AGC Association, American General Contractors. He always said he was Mr. Outside and I was Mr. Inside. 'Cause (laughs) he went to all the conventions, and all those kind of things, and I stayed, by preference, I stayed at home and worked with the equipment. Sometimes he'd be gone two weeks. But we had good people, people that we had raised, I had an uncle, my father's brother, that came out of World War One, and went to work for my father, and he was a comptroller, and an excellent one. And as the years built up, we kept hiring men and training men, and the best men we ever had was the people that we trained. And we had many many many people, who worked for us 30, 40 and 50 years. So it was a good marriage, for everybody.
- JM: That's good. I guess a lot of the people that went with you to work on the Parkway stayed with you afterwards.
- DT: Oh yeah. Yeah. 'Specially the drill form. We trained all those mountaineers up there to run those drills, and put the dynamite, we had, of course, a man, teachin' 'em. And uh, yeah, next job, they'd go with us, right on. They'd start and keep on goin'.
- JM: Bet that was a big change in their life. Big break for them. Do you remember bulldozers? I talked to one man who said that he drove the world's largest bulldozer at the time, right around Gillespie Gap.
- DT: Well I'll take you out on the porch in a minute and show you those pictures out there. We actually had the first bulldozer on the Parkway. And it was



DT: (Continued) made by an outfit called Busars (?) Area. Which later on quit makin' 'em. And Caterpillar Tractor, or Caterpillar Best, started makin' their own bulldozers. But if it had not been for the bulldozers, you would a had to drill and shoot all those stumps. As it was, the bulldozers went in there, and we called that clearin' and grubbin'. They grubbed the stumps out, just ahead of the excavation crew. That was when, in the '30s, is when the big mechanization of the equipment came. People went from trucks and mules and drag pans and old wagons, and all of a sudden started, by 1929, on up to about 1935, the whole equipment industry was revolutionized.

JM: Describe some of the other equipment you used.

DT: Well, we used Caterpillar equipment, we used North West Shovels, we used Low Range shovels, and I'll show you some of those pictures. Uh, we had, 'course we used all kinds of trucks. Mainly we used Ford Trucks. And we used Tell Smith Crushers, to crush stone, crushin' on the Parkway, and at that time there wasn't that many different kinds of equipment. Now, there's dozens and dozens of things. Some of 'em <sup>as</sup> ~~was~~ new <sup>as</sup> ten years ago.

JM: Right. When you went to Little Switzerland to eat, what kind of food did they serve you? I know you told me in the car that you probably couldn't see what you were eatin', it was so dark.

DT: Oh, it was just old country cookin'. And mostly, I think, we had potatoes every night, boiled potatoes, and she put some meat in it good. But it was good food. I don't know how sanitary it was (laughs) but it was good.

JM: What else did you do for pastimes, while you were up there?

DT: Well there wasn't much pastime. You went to work at five o'clock, and you quit at seven at night, although sometimes you'd stay up until the sun went down. And I had no recreation, I started off at 18 years old. And Spruce Pine had a movie theater at that time. But it only ran 'bout two or three nights a week. And sometimes I'd get so darn bored, I'd drive all the way to Asheville. (Laughs) And turn around and get back. But there was no, 'course, no social life. And I didn't know many people up in the mountains. By the time you worked a 12, 14-hour day, you ain't lookin' for a whole lot of recreation.

JM: When you went to Asheville, did you go through Marion, or through Burnsville to get there? Or neither?

DT: Oh, no, I went the other way. I went through Burnsville, and around that way. Through Waterville. Isn't that the name of it, Waterville?

JM: OK. No, it starts with a W, though.

DT: Weaverville. Weaverville. Yeah. (Laughs) Yeah, I used to, when I was a boy, I went to camp, in Burnsville, Camp Mount Mitchell, in Burnsville, and I knew the area pretty good before I ever got up there when I was 18 years old.

JM: Have you been back to the Parkway a lot since those days?

DT: I try to go every year. I haven't been in two years. My wife is a trustee at Mary Wallin (?) college, at Stanton Virginia, so most of my, has been Skyline Drive, 'cause it runs right there by Waynesboro. And, you know, a lot of people say, "I don't like Skyline Drive. I like the Smokey Mountains. I like the Blue Ridge Parkway." They all got their own beauty. To me, there's nothin' any prettier than that Skyline Drive, from Waynesboro, on down South. And it has no comparison, with what's, Cumberland Knob or any of those other places, it's a different type of beauty.

JM: It's a different-- from the up, lookin' down, over that beautiful valley.

DT: M-hm. If I had to say, ~~the~~ <sup>from</sup> Front Royal, down to the North Carolina line,



- DT: (Continued) is, it's just as pretty, if not prettier, than any other part. My reason for sayin' that, is you can't see much off the Smoky Mountain, Blue Ridge Parkway. And it was that way when we built it, and 'course you can see how it's grown up now. Every time my wife and I go, we try to go up and stay at Pisgah Inn, and we come up through from Asheville. And then we go down the other side to Balsam Gap. And I said, "You know what? We ain't seein' half this thing, the trees are got, you got to go to an overlook."
- JM: Yeah, that's a new issue we're dealing with, is how to deal with the viewshed. And whether we spend the money cutting <sup>the</sup> big trees back, and planting things that don't grow so high, how to do that, whether we want to spend the money doing it.
- DT: Well I don't think they have to cut 'em back, they need to think 'em. Thin the limbs. You don't have to kill the tree. And don't do it all the way, just do one section, say, of 500 feet, and in a couple a miles, do another 500 feet. I wouldn't destroy the trees. But um, trees grow, people don't realize how fast they do grow.
- JM: Well when you were building the Parkway, did you expect it to look like how it looks now? Do you think your expectations were fulfilled?
- DT: Oh yeah, I knew what it was going to look like. I didn't think it'd have the popularity that it has. I been to the Blue Ridge Parkway up at uh, what's the Gap ~~on~~ the Tennessee line?
- JM: Um, Rowan Mountain, are you thinking about that?
- DT: It runs from uh, anyhow, it's a Gap up there, and when you cross the Gap you're in Tennessee and you're goin' down like this. Um, that part is uh, it's pretty. But it's not as pretty as the rest of it. And of course, at that time, when we were workin' up there, all those trees were dyin', and Dutch Elm trees were dyin', and really, really looked bad. But now they've got it cleaned up, and I would like seein' them do somethin' to thin out those trees. Because, every generation, you get a little further away from what actually happened. And we got, I've said this many times. Here's a man and his family ridin' down the road: "Oh, isn't that valley purty. Oooh, isn't this beautiful, and oh, look at that stream." They don't think about what it cost us to build that thing, and what a misery it was to build it. (Laughs)
- JM: That's right, people don't. They think it was always there.
- DT: Always there.
- JM: I give my history programs, so many people come up and say, "I had no idea that it was all planned." They just thought it was always there.
- DT: Yeah. Half of 'em don't even pay any attention to the road at all. 'Course me having built some of 'em, and buildin' roads all mylife, even to this day I ride down the road and I say, "Gosh. I wonder how they did this. I wonder how they did that." But people got so much distraction now, you got television, you got everything to distract people. One of the things that amuses me about the Parkway, is the out of state people that come there. I've never seen any figures, but your office might have some. But I think that on any given day, 60 percent of the people are not from North Carolina. Florida, Georgia. I seen 'em there from-- last time I was at Pisgah Inn, we had another couple with us. ANd I heard these motorcycles come up, "Brrum, brrum." And these two couples, one on one motorcycle, and one on another, drove up, and they had been two days and two nights, comin' from Colorado. And they stayed at the Inn, the Pisgah Inn. And I heard all this noise during the night, and I went to the door and looked down



DT: (Continued) there, and they put those motorcycles in the room. (Laughs)

JM: Huh. That's interesting. Well, they're saying that North Carolina is the number one retirement state in the country now, and that's another thing that we're facing, is so many people are wanting to build second homes in the mountains, and it's changing our viewscape, you know, just--

DT: Yeah, I read somethin' in the North Carolina magazine, just this past week, I got it over there. About the, up in the area where High Hampton End is, and Highlands and all that area in there, 'course the tourists flock up there at the Fontana Dam. But they got some kind of somethin' goin' on up in there, they wanted to make some changes. And 'course, people are against any kind of change. Do you take North Carolina Magazine? Oh, take that magazine, it's great. DOESN'T cost hardly anything.

JM: OK, I'll think about it. I get Blue Ridge Country, but I don't get it.

DT: Well I'll give you my magazine in a minute and you can thumb through it. It's very inexpensive and very well done. They're quite abreast of what's goin' on in the state, from Murphy to Maneo (?)

JM: That sounds good. What are-- do you have any best experiences on the Parkway, or favorite remembrances?

DT: No, not really. I hate to say this, but my brother got killed on the Parkway. Yeah, he was visiting my uncle, who was a superintendent. This was up in Glendale Springs. And he'd been up there all summer, he was 14 years old, and 'course my uncle let him drive the pick-up, up and down the road. And my uncle didn't have any ~~children~~ <sup>children</sup> he thought of him as his own son. And they built a road and they'd put the crushed stone down, and they were what we call settin' up the crushed stone, 'fore you pave it. And they have a ridge in the middle of the road, about that high, and he ran into it. The pick-up started doin' this, went off, only a 10 foot embankment, and killed him. Broke his neck. That's the worst experience I've had. And of course, I've had other experiences. I worked down here for another contractor, the summer of ~~1938~~ '38. And I saved my money 'cause I was going up to the mountains to spend a few days in Waynesville. And we were buildin' up on the mountain there, what I still call ~~(a building site)~~ <sup>-I said the name just a while ago.</sup> Anyhow it's where the Devil's Court House is. And I went up there, and I was ridin' in a piece of equipment, with a man, he was a mountaineer, and I came back, got the car and drove all the way back down the mountain. And I realized I'd lost my wallet. And I needed to get it back. I had 320 dollars, and that was a lot of money in those days. (Laughs)

JM: Yeah, that is a lot of money. That's too bad. Do you remember anything about moonshinin' up there?

DT: 'Bout what?

JM: Moonshining stuff?

DT: Oh yes, that was very prevalent. I had this mechanic who, named Larry Lyles, he's dead now. He was quite a character. Quite a drinker. And he'd work 14, 15 hours a day, and when he'd get off work, he'd drink about a gallon of that stuff. And he gave me some one time in a little Dixie cup, he said, "Now, go ahead and taste it, it's good." I said, "Larry, I don't wanna taste that stuff." He said, "Go ahead, it won't hurt you." And I had my hand up like that, and he hit my hand, and I got a big mouthful of that stuff, and I thought I was gonna die. He said, "Well, I got to where you hold a bunch gasoline in that ~~car~~ <sup>car</sup>." So he says, "I mix that with my gasoline to make my car run." (Laughs) We saw, we saw quite a few-- I never saw but one active



DT: (Continued) still, saw a lot of abandoned stills. But the government was really pushin' 'em there. And you know, right now, in this state, they're still bootleggin'. Still makin' it.

JM: Yeah. They're doin' it more inside than outside now. But they still are, you can still find it, or read an article that a still was busted, or somebody got caught. Yeah.

DT: Well that's about the only way some of 'em had anything to eat, was makin' moonshine. Fellow told me one time, "You know why these people walk like this up in the mountains?" I said, "No." He said, "Cause they get thar ~~the~~ carryin' a hundred pound sack of sugar on their shoulder." (Laughs)

JM: Yep, I wouldn't be surprised. (Laughs) Yeah, they had to do a lot of that too. Um, you said that you, did you only work summers, for those three summers? Or did you work up there year-round?

DT: No, I just worked summers, '38, '39, and '40. And then, I was in college at that time. I only went to college two years. And the war come on, and I thought I was gonna be drafted any day. But we started building army bases and air bases. And I went to doin' that, and they wouldn't take me in the army, they said, "You're doin' more good where <sup>would</sup> right where you are." So I tried to get in the service, but they just ~~did~~ not take me, said, "You stay where you are." So I did.

JM: Did you go to school here in town here?

DT: Yes. I went to, graduated from high school here. Then I went to University of Virginia two years. I didn't try to get into Duke, in fact I didn't much care whether I went to Duke or not. I had five children and eight grandchildren, and none of them saw fit to go to DUke. Nothin's wrong with Duke, 'cept it's... I know this, I'm glad to have 'em in my town. It's a billion dollar a year budget. And we get a heck of a lot of it in sales and services in this town. Wouldn't be much of a town without Duke. 'Specially with the tobacco industry gone.

JM: Right. That's about all I think of Durham, is Duke, now, anyway. Hm. Can you think of anything else you want to add to this interview before we go and look at the pictures.

DT: Uh, well, I can't remember, I think I told you over the phone, that I do remember a Chief Engineer for the Western part of the Parkway, his name was Obenshane. (Laughs) If his name was Smith, I wouldn't have remembered it. But he was the resident engineer for those two or three projects out in the very Western part of the Parkway. And he was a very nice person, 'course at that time I was 18 years old, and I guess he was 38 years old, and I thought he was an old man. (Laughs) But they had some excellent people, and they put that thing together, and I don't know who to give the credit for, and I'm sure Mr. Roosevelt, all he did was say, "Do it." And I'm sure Mr. Ickes said, apparently hired him some good men. And they got the thing started. And it ran like a charm. There never was any hanky panky about it. They had good people in the jobs, and they paid you right on time. And, now it seems like any time a contractor in this state gets a job, you got to sue somebody. ~~We~~ never heard of that before. So it was well run, and no politics were involved in it. And there was politics involved in it with VIrginia and Tennessee, didn't want us to get all of it. But I think Mr. Ickes handled that, and he handled it well. So apparently they got over that. But it was some kind of mad people in Virginia.

JM: Oh it was Tennessee that was so mad--



DT: Yeah, and, well see what they wanted to do, they didn't want to come into North Carolina at Galax, they wanted to go all the way around and come in, in the mountains. Which would've put about another hundred miles of it in Virginia. BUT it worked out for the best. I think one of the funniest stories I ever heard, though, was, I might've told you this when I was talkin' to you before, that uh, I heard a man on the radio, I was drivin' down the road, this has only been about six or seven years ago. Just happened to cut the radio on, this man was talkin' about, bein' interviewed, and he said, "Well, I just got back from the Blue Ridge Parkway," he says, "That certainly is beautiful up there." Said, "You know, Mr. ROosevelt built that for a defense highway."

JM: I've heard that rumor too.

DT: And uh, I couldn't wait till I could get to a phone, (laughs) it was a Charlotte station, and I called the man and I said, "I don't know who you were talkin' to, but he don't know what the heck he's talkin' about. 'Cause Mr. Roosevelt didn't build that road to keep the Japs from comin' through North Carolina, South Carolina." (Laughs) It didn't. It was put there to put the people to work.

JM: Yeah, I've heard that rumor too, but I've never seen it substantiated anywhere.

DT: It's like the CCC, and the WPA, and all those. They had their purpose, and they did a good job. I wish they had somethin' like that now. The North Carolina, we have what we call Boot Camp, it's like the Marines, and they're puttin' these young boys who are in prison, they give 'em a chance to go, and they treat 'em just like they were goin' into the military service. And it's down at uh, um, I can't think of it ~~right~~ now, it's right on the border of North Carolina and South Carolina. It's an old army airbase called McCall. Maxton, North Carolina. And they got 200 of these kids on there, and 'course they serve their time there and they learn a trade. And that's what they need to learn, is a trade.

JM: That's right. That's what the whole project with the Parkway was, they gave a lot of people jobs. I talked to some men that it changed their whole lives.

DT: Well Mr. Roosevelt made a lot of enemies, but he sure did a lot of good gettin' the people back on their feet. (Pause) Would you like to see those pictures then?

JM: Yeah, I'm gonna bring my tape recorder, and I'm gonna let it record as you talk about them. That way we'll-- (TAPE OFF)

(TAPE BACK ON)

DT: Get some light on this thing so you can see.

JM: That's really nice that you did that.

DT: Uh, this is on the Blue Ridge Parkway. I think that is a Devil's COURT House tunnel. It looks like it.

JM: And they're just beginning the tunnel. So they've put dynamite in and they're blasting--

DT: Yeah, what you did, you had drills up on the frame. And you drilled in there, six or eight feet, shoot the dynamite. I mean, pull the drill out, shoot the dynamite, and this wagon and that shovel would go in there, and dig it and load this thing, and they'd take it on down and put it in the field. These are the air-compressors, that supplied the drills. This is on the Blue Ridge Parkway, if I remember correctly, that's up



DT: (Continued) about (pause) near the Linville area, I <sup>took</sup> ~~think~~ that picture <sup>myself.</sup> ~~was~~. That happens to be the Winston-Salem airport. This happens to be I-64 out of Richmond, Virginia, goin' towards Norfolk. This is Gillespie Gap, the job I was on. And this was a dam in Broken Bow, Oklahoma. This is the crushin' plant in Guatemala City, and this is a concrete paving job out of Brownsville, Pennsylvania. And this is an asphalt plant here in Durham. And there you can see the drills. That's where you drill and shoot, you have to move all the equipment out and <sup>then</sup> shoot. This is part of I-95, North of Richmond. And this was another tunnel, that happens to be a dam, in Bear Creek, Pennsylvania. This is the same type, what I call, not a steam shovel, but a diesel shovel. This happens to be in Guatemala. And this is Beech Gap. Are you familiar with Beech Gap? That's where Devil's Court House. In fact, <sup>of the matter</sup> ~~the (indistinguishable)~~ the Court House, the tunnel is right up there. This picture, this picture's on the other side, and this picture's on this side.

JM: About what year were these taken?

DT: Oh, these were all taken in the '30s, late '30s. These are all various ages. And this is Devil's Court House. And, no way to turn around the equipment. So we had these machines made, where we'd shuttle, and the equipment would go back and forth, and then we'd have to turn around. And uh, which was a great thing. But that is, it's on the map, it's called Beech Mountain, uh, Beech Gap, not Beech Mountain. And this road here <sup>happens</sup> ~~has~~ to be in North Africa. Now I'll get you a copy of these pictures.

JM: Yeah, I was gonna ask you, if you could do that.

DT: Yeah. Let me see if I can get my son <sup>on</sup> ~~at~~ right now, before I forget it. (Makes a phone call) Uh, this is Mr. Teer, is Rob in? Yes, Ma'am. I'm at home. Thank you. (Hangs up phone) My son, well you can imagine how many pictures we've got. And it's always been my department to take care of pictures. I've got four metal four-drawer filing cabinets downstairs, full of pictures. From all over where we were. Africa--now, I'll only pick out the Blue Ridge Parkway things. But he's got some extra copies, and I'll get him to pick 'em out, and I'll mail 'em to you. You give me an address.

JM: Isure will. Could you jot down on the back the general area of where things were?

DT: Yeah. Yeah, I can tell you just about where all of 'em are.

JM: That's really great. I'd really like to make those into slides, and use those in the slide shows.

DT: I don't think, I don't think we got the negatives.

JM: Ok, but we can still even make slides using photographs. We can do that too.

DT: He gave me this for my birthday, two or three years ago.

JM: Hmm, that's a good present.

DT: I like this-- I've never seen one before, but he got one in his office just like it.

JM: That would be good for an exhibit, at a visitor center, somethin' like that. We could get one of our men to make one, at the woodworking shop. Well, I've been real happy with this interview.

DT: Well that's good. (END OF SIDE TWO)



March 20, 1997

Mr. Dillard Teer  
Teer Associates  
PO Box 13508  
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709

Dear Mr. Teer:

Thank you for loaning the photographs and videotape of Blue Ridge Parkway construction. I have made copies, which will be stored, along with your oral history tapes in the parks archives collection.

The Blue Ridge Parkway Oral History Project was a great success. We were able to interview 50 men who were involved in the early construction of the Parkway - CCC workers, construction crews, surveyors and former NPS staff. The oral histories will be used by researchers and park staff for future study.

Again, thank you for your help in the project. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (704) 271-4779, ext. 243.

Sincerely,

Jackie Holt  
Park Curator