

Ed culler Interview transcription

Interviewee: Ed Culler
Interviewer:
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Begin Interview:

1 Interviewer: Interview... Mr. Ed Culler... Tuesday, November 3, 1987... Boone, NC.
History of New River Light and Power Company.

[taping includes background noise, particularly people walking and talking]

2 Ed Culler: Now let me see watch you wanna...

3 Int.: [voice very loud] Like I said, we're writing a book on the history of New River.

4 E.C. Huh?

6 Int.: We're writing a book on the history of New River...and it started back in 1915 and I am sure you must remember that because didn't you start to work...

7 E.C.: [Int.errupting] ...Well it was just right down here...

8 Int.: Right

9 E.C.: And got warshed away 'bout 1916.

10 Int.: Right, during the flood of 1916.

11 E.C.: Yeah, '16....got warshed away, all the material down there...I made a trip to Wilkesboro got a load of stuff to go in that place

12 Int.: You did?

13 E.C.: I was drivin' a team at that time.

14 Int.: Now this was in 1915?

15 E.C.: Yes, ma'am.

16 Int.: When they first built it?

17 E.C.: I went to work for the state well on 'bout 1913 and never quit until 1957. 45 years.

18 Int.: That's a long time. Where...I was wondering about the road that they had to get down to the site.

19 E.C.: Roads?

20 Int.: Uhhuh...did they built a road to get down to the State Farm to build it?

21 E.C.: Oh, yeah, yeah...

22 Int.: Where was that?

23 E.C.: Sure they did...I hauled stuff down in there while they was a buildin' that road....built it...

24 Int.: [Int.errupting] where did they....

25 E.C.: Built it with a pick and shovel...

26 Int.: Oh my...

27 E.C.: ...and hands.It went out here a by the Johnson-Cook (sp?) Ford and right off of [pause] extension 105 that enters in to 421 and turn right there and went out through Mr. Dougherty's field...he owned all that country in there... and then went on out, it wasn't long till it struck the State Farm Road, didn't have to have no right-a-way cause Mr. Dougherty give 'em a right-a-way through his'un...he, you may not know what I'm talking 'bout...Mr. Dougherty was the president of the college at that time and his brother was secretary and business manager. Mr. Floyd Tate... [pause]...was foreman over the road that they builted in there.

28 Int.: And they called it, did they call it a turnpike?

29 E.C.: Ma'am?

30 Int.: Did they call it a turnpike?

31 E.C.: No ma'am, they just called it the State Farm road.

32 Int.: The State Farm road...

33 E.C.: Yes, ma'am, that's a how come it be called that is thatta State Farm Road then turned off down there a little before you get there then and went they other way and the State Farm Road come on down here to Lowe's.

34 Int.: Okay...so it's where State Farm Road is today?

35 E.C.: huh?

36 Int.: Is it where State Farm road is today?

37 E.C.: Yes ma'am. It ran into State Farm road today.

38 Int.: Okay...how long did it take them to build that...the power plant down there?

39 E.C.: That power plant...I really don't know...I remember the foreman over...who put the plant in there...Mr. David Sherer from Tennessee.

40 Int.: umhmm

41 E.C.: In later years after he got that done...well I don't know how long...I heard he committed suicide...very smart fella, and he walked it, he walked it on from...[pause]...do you know where the Northwest bank is?

42 Int.: ummhmm

43 E.C.: Just the other side...you know where Boone Drug Company is?

44 Int.: ummhmm

45 E.C.: All a that in there was a big hotel, and a big country store...dry goods and notions and groceries...Mr. Coffis (sp?) owned all that in there... and they sold out and a Mr. Critcher (sp?) and then he...David Sherer boarded there and walked it...twice a day. [pause] yeah I was a drivin' a team at that time... now the college had teams and had to do all their work with team mules... had six...I drove a big black pair with a tan nose...boy were they purty. I was just a young fella then about 23.[pause] then they a built that and it go a washed away...[coughs]...just a short time after that then Dr. Dougherty bought up a place between here and Blowing Rock about three miles... and excavated and built a big damn up there...now we're a getting' too fast I a reckon...this power plant down here after a Mr. Tate got that road done...and he was gonna...he took care a that plant till it was a warshed away, and then they built a, that another electric hydro plant between here and Blowing Rock, and hit stayed right in there until New River Light and Power went outta business...well they didn't go outta business...[pause]...they used to make only the electricity in Boone...and that's what I done...I operated the...after they put in that plant then, they bought one engine and a dynamo to put in there...[laughs]...put me in there to look after it and tied it in with that electric hydro plant, and I'd go down there to that plant every evening 'bout the time the load begin to build up, I'd put that little 'ol engine on and help the electric hydro plant pull it till about midnight, and then I'd cut it off, you see, and that electric hydro plant up there could carry the load on till about six-thirty of the morn, and I'd get up about five-thirty, and I had a farmer, he'd knowed...he always had a steam up and I'd go down there

and I put that on there and I'd run it for about nine-thirty or ten o'clock and I'd cut it off again, and I hardly ever had to run it that much in the day time.

46 Int.: The first power plant, down on the South Fork...

47 E.C.: Yeah, yes 'um

48 Int.: Was there a sawmill and a gristmill there too?

49 E.C.: Yes ma'am, that's what I went to Wilkesboro to get...the gristmill.

50 Int.: Ohhh, okay...so it was run with the water wheel or the...

51 E.C.: [Int.errupting] Yeah...the uh, gristmill and um a boat for to make flour in, you know, to fold it...no, I know exactly when I went it took me five days to go to Wilkesboro and back to get a load. The man said, "where's your other wagon at?" He was in the depot...he said, "well I wrote Mr. Dougherty and told him he'd have to send two wagons, because you can't get all this stuff in one wagon." But they did, I had a big pair a mules and I brought everything in one wagon till I got to Patterson factory...then they had a what they called a Boone, Blowing Rock, and Lenoir turnpike, and I hit that, and then wound all the around through them mountains down there...they made it about ten miles shorter after they built the highway...oh it was terrible on earth, I'd have to... [pause]...the mules just stopped, just nearly gived out, and I'd get me a stick and punch the mud all out of the spokes, you know, all around the four of 'em again, and it'd be some time before it'd gather up enough to deter again. The younger people really don't know hardships that the people had to go through then...

52 Int.: That's so true...

53 E.C.: It is true...it's a sight on earth, no overshoes to wear and it cold weather, no gloves, and you had to take you a provision box along ad take you a few cabbage and potatoes and slice 'em up and a piece a meat an' fry 'em in a syrup bucket to make you some coffee in...I've eat enuff fire coals [laughs] between here and I've hauled several, several loads from Lenoir to Boone...took three days to make a trip from here to Lenoir and back...[pause]... and then they put in that little hydro plant in by this 'lectric machinery and that wasn't gonna last long so they bought another engine...they went to Tampee, [Tampa] Floridee...had this big engine in a cotton mill down there at that time, and they were a complicated thing you had to watch them awful or you'd gonna getta bearing hot...and they bought that there...and I run hit, and they seen it was gonna hot load hit at two, and they built in two more big boilers to make the steam...took a hundred and fifty pounds a steam to run 'em, and they went up nohow and bought another engine...ol' skinner and brought in there and run hat a while, well we had 'em all hit then, aqnd then they put in a steam turbine that pulled a thousand killawatts and I put the switch in and tied those in ta everything that was a runnin'...

54 Int.: What year was that?

55 E.C.: I just a really don't know...sometime in the '40s I guess, that we put the next 'un in there...I just wouldn't be certain...I never thought about havin' to say, tellin' anybody...[laughs]...when that thing was done.

56 Int.: well I'm sure you remember the 1940 flood and also....

57 E.C.: [Int.errupting] oh yes, the 1940 flood, I had built a, I had a man to build me a new house, I've got, just off of faculty street there's a street run up the hill there they call Hill Street, and I've got five acres of land up there and put a house on it and a, after my wife and I retired...she worked at the college cafeteria...and after we retired she bought a lot just across the street on the left hand side of the road and we had this man to build a house, a wood house, shiplap weather boarding and all insulated, storm windows and storm doors, three bedrooms, a bathroom, storage room, two porches, and a living room, dining room, and a kitchen, and two porches—a front porch and a back porch...a beautiful, beautiful house if I'm gonna brag on it, it was a beautiful house.[pause] and years ago when I bought that, why I put me out an orchard up there and apples and cherries and we had all the fruit we, thousands of apples laid down rotting, and I built me a nice chicken house...I sent to Raleigh and got a specification...how to build it for puttin' lights in it and everything for fifty layers...andi never did buy but twenty-five...I'd order me twenty-five, but they always sent me a couple extry, and a we had all the eggs in the world that we could use and at the end of every week my wife would fill up a peck bucket full and I'd...then they'd buy 'em at these stores. Fifteen cents a dozen. I bought us a cow...a milk cow...well I bought, I guess, fifteen or twenty milk cows, and I bought me some hogs...push that off I don't want this on the tape....

[tape turned off]

[tape turned back on]

58 Int.: What about the State Farm down where the dam site was on the South Fork?

59 E.C.: Ma'am?

60 Int.: What about the State Farm? Did you work down on the State farm?

61 E.C.: No ma'am...I'd go down there and when I came to do the mowin' and of course we had a horse bailer and I'd take hit down there and bail the hay, and that's about all I ever did on the farm, just do the mowin' down there.

62 Int.: Someone told me you were the one that had to dynamite the dam in 1923...

63 E.C.: Huh?

64 Int.: Wade Brown told me that you were the one that had to dynamite the dam in 1923.

65 E.C.: Yeah, yeah. A fella by the name of Minton. Avery Minton and I we'd denamited that...it warshed out ...it didn't warsh the dam out...it helt the water back, but it warshed out the dirt away around it you know....on each end. Yes, I denamited that thing, tried to tear it up, but boys he had built that thing, Mr. David Sherer had, with lumber and had bolted it in there and two or three layers, we'd blowed two or three holes in it but we didn't bore enough, there wasn't enough pounds to let the water all go through there.

66 Int.: What was the flood like in 1916?

67 E.C.: Oh, hit was terrible. It was a lot worse than that one we had in forty. It warshed what they call Stoney Fork from Deep Gap, from that down to Wilkesboro just painted plum out...house and all. And then this here forty flood, why that had done, well not near as bad, but there was a Mr. Estes...there's a road over here at Blowing Rock that turns off after you get through Blowing Rock on your right, they call it the Globe Road, goes down in there, and he had a farm down in there. Big Farm, on that river, and it just cleaned him out, and he just left there and come to Boone, he had two boys and a girl. He come to Boone, and they worked for the college, and they was wonderful good folks, he and his wife and those two boys and his girl, wonderful good folks, and this Mr. Estes and Mrs. Estes died why, well one of the boys, the younger boy, bought out his brother and his sister and he owns the whole thing now, and he had a man down there livin' on that farm down there for twenty-five he told me, how come...this Ms. Miller that's a nurse here, her and her husband got twenty-one acres of corn down on that place, and they met some way or another and mentioned me and I don't know how come they to do that, why I think Ms. Miller told 'em this Ed Culler fella, a fella by the name of Ed Culler saide he'd knowed where that place was, and Ms McClain said well yeah, I know him well and you tell him I'mma comin' to see him, me and my wife. Hadn't heard from him, didn't know where he was, thought he was dead, and he and his wife both come...been here twice since then...and he told me, Mr. McClain told me, that he told me that Estes had been offered a hundred thousand dollars for the timber on that place, and said Ralph said, "aww, I don't..." he's awful easy, his daddy was awful easy, "I don't need the money, to leave great big ol' piles of sawdust all over the place, I don't reckon I'll sell it." [laughs]

68 Int.: Mr. Culler, what was it like when electricity first came to Boone?

69 E.C.: Well it looked like a show winder [window].

70 Int.: How do you mean?

71 E.C.: I mean of a night, it was wonderful...wonderful, you didn't want to go to bed, you just wanted to stay up where you could see...I was living on the college campus then, and where we could see the dormitories, you know. All the lights in the dormitories and every thing like that, and then when that power plant down here went out, why then we had to go to the lamps, back to the lamps again till we built that'un up here on the river.

72 Int.: What kind of appliances did people first have, like they had lights, did they have radios, or irons?

73 E.C.: aww, they didn't have no arns, didn't have no radios, didn't have no tellyvision. In the dormitories at that time when I went to workin' for the school they had less than two hundred students and... [pause]...two girls had to, and two boys had to sleep in one bed...they didn't have a thing in the world, they didn't have anything like that. They had watch ya' call these big ol' high dressers with the glass in it, you know. Didn't have no runnin' warter in the dormitories, only in the kitchen. Had warter runnin' in the dormitory in the kitchen, and the girls and boys had a pitcher and a bowl and they had to carry the warter from there to their room, and they had a little ol' stove, a little bigger than that stool there, and they wood is cut pretty short for them to burn in there...[pause]...and in the wInt.er time when tings are pretty slow, Mr. Dougherty would want me to go down to the dormitory and put two loads of wood in every girl's room that day and split another for building' their fire the next morning. I've done that lots and lots of times. It's a sight on earth that the things that I have did it up there that I have never mentioned. I think of it, it runs through my mind, I just can't get it over. Had a crib, what they call a crib in each dormitory. I've shelled the corn at that crib and carried the corn on my shoulders to the mill and had their mill ground, and then the people around, out in the country that had milk to sell, well they'd send me out there and contract their buttermilk, I've carried gallons, and gallons, and gallons of buttermilk from houses around to the dormitories. [laughs] Well I tell you, it was rough. [pause] My grandfather, Dr. Dougherty said he was a young fellar, bout ten year old, my grandfather was raised in South Carolina, and his father and mother was both dead and they had a plant asherin', he called it, for ten thousand acres, had it in cotton and melons...his father and mother were both dead and he had a brother older than he and they were a runnin' it and when the nigger was...can't say that though [laughs]...when the slaves were freed that broke 'em up... [coughs]...and grandfather, he was the younger one, he said he was just disgusted and he just left there and walked, it was in Orangeburg, South Carolina where they lived, he walked all the way to Charlotte...didn't like there, stayed there a few days and didn't like that...he stayed there, and then he walked all the way until he got to Wilkesboro, there wasn't no North Wilkesboro there then, and he liked there pretty well...it wasn't...not much of a town then, and a, he met my grandmother and married her, and raised three children. He's a millwrighter that built mill wheels and took care of mills and ground and Made mill and flour and feedstuff, and he a heard a one being in Boone. He didn't know where Boone was at...knowed it was across the Blue Ridge he said. He walked all the way to Boone to see and Dr. Dougherty said he was about ten year old, and said, "Ed, I can see Uncle Ben a comin' through our yard, had a big black hat on," said, "night, nearly night, him and father sat up about all night and talked." Said, "I took off with Uncle Ben." His name was Ben, and the ol' mill then sat about where the new [inaudible word] gym is, the mill rouse run right down through the campus, and that ol' mill rouse stayed there till after I went to Boone, course it drawed in a lot you know, but you could see it where it ran.

74 Int.: What was your grandfather's last name? Culler?

75 E.C.: Culler

76 Int.: Culler

77 E.C.: and so he said, " I went with my father and Uncle Ben to show him where the mill was and... [inaudible due to paging system in background] ...grandfather was his father told him what he would do, give him so and so, Dr. Dougherty told me several times said, "after I heard father say a lot of times, after we got Uncle Ben there for the mill tenant he was the honest miller." [laughs]He didn't steal their grain, and my father was the younger on, he had two boys and two girls and Wilkesboro, and my father was the younger one, and he brought him with him. He and grandmother...and, he tended that mill for years and years and years, and got married...met my mother in this country...I believe she was from Brushy Fork, just across from town, west of town, and father was twenty-one. Mother was about eighteen, fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen...so she was a lot younger than grandfather and so Mr...Dr. Dougherty's father let my father have a ol' log house, it sit...you know where the industrial arts building is? It sit just the other end of hit.From here I'ma talkin' bout. And I was born right there. My father and mother tell me, so had a cow pasture back up on that hill from the house. Dr. Dougherty had to go to get the cows to drive them in off the pasture to milk of an evening. Mother said come by there and pick me up on his back and take me, drive the cows they had to come by the house nearly, then he would put me off there. Now the Dougherty's and the Cullers have been great friends for years and years and they haven't run out yet....there's not but one...[pause]...daughter livin' yet that belonged to Dr. Dougherty's brother and...

78 Int.: [Int.errupting] Annie?

79 E.C.: Annie...and she comes to see me just as regular...she's right at eighty year old I think...she must be, I never have heard her say, but she's a good bit older than my daughter...and at this time, years later I got married...somebody oughta whoop me...and I married a wonderful girl though, and you know where the Boone Mall is? The man owned that then owned fifteen thousand acres and he dealt in livestock, he didn't farm any...cattle and sheep, and he had an ol' log house on his place and he let me go in that old house and my wife and I lived on his place three years, and I lernt to milk.

80 Int.: What was this man's name that owned the land?

81 E.C.: Winkler, Charles Winkler. I knowed all of 'em. There was John, Joe, Jim, Will, and George, and two girls Amber and Sallie. I stayed all night one night at Sallie's house, after she got married. The cottage at this time had a little dairy and it sat over there near where the football stadium is, and our cow pasture was up on the hill where the education building is now...continuing education. So...at this time professor Dolph, now he's the older one, he was business manager and secretary, and I'ma a tellin' you the truth he's a one of the most...to me...he's one of the most honest and truthfulest man I ever met. And a...so he come to see me three or four times, and I gotta comin' up there and workin' for him. He'd say well, 'how much is Mr. Winkler givin' you a day?' And I said, "sixty cents." And then he was payin' me ten cents more than most of the people on that

farm who got fifty cents. Well he said, "I'll give you seventy-five cents a day, and give you work all the time in the winter time. How'd you like to milk for me up there?" I said, "That's alright." So one day I seen him, passing by his office, and seen him and told him I decided to come up there...he told me, "Alright, go over to the barn and get a team," there was a team standin' there with a wagon, "and move. You can move down there in that ol' log house where grandfather lived that tended the mill so long." And I did. [laughs] I got along alright then. I milked those cows and then when I put the wood in the girl's room while I was milkin' there...after I milked there bout three weeks, maybe four, had a yankee woman, matron at the boy's dormitory, I carried the milk in...just half of it...and she said, "Culler, are you puttin' warter in this milk?" I said, "No, I'm not puttin' warter in no milk." "Well you're getting' a lot more than that other fellar did." [laughs] He didn't know how to milk, this other fella didn't, ya keep the barn clean and bedded down. I tell you Mr. Winkler learned me a lot about that.

82 Int.: What was Boone like during the depression?

83 E.C.: [long pause] Well, to tell you the truth, we folks that worked for the college, course they cut our wages some, but not awful too much...they didn't keep but only the hands they had too...but it's a sight on earth that the people came by wantin' a job, a sight on earth...every day...every hour...wanted a job, but the folks that hired told 'em they just couldn't do it. It's just like everybody else that you go to they just can't do it, we just haven't got the money to pay you. We got them work for you to do, if we had the money, which we ain't got the money to pay you. We don't want you to work for nothin', but we just can't month you, aww it was slow, I tell you it was...[laughs]

84 Unknown speaker: hey, Mr. Culler

85 E.C.: Good mornin'

86 U.S.: [approaching] Good morning, how are you today?

87 E.C. I'm doing very well...

[tape turned off]

[tape turned back on]

88 Int.: It's busy around here.

89 E.C.: Ma'am?

90 Int.: It's busy around here, isn't it?

91 E.C.: Yes ma'am, yeah it's been pretty slow today though...

92 Int.: Do you remember when people started getting stoves and refrigerators?

93 E.C.: Oh yeah.

94 Int.: 'Bout when was that? What did they look like?

95 E.C.: Well, the stoves and refrigerators looked about like they do know but a lot of improvements though, lots improvements. I bought one, I don't know what year it was. Someone up town just had one and I were working and didn't have the money, and the folks that were runnin' it knew me...Mr. Greene and a Mr. Cook...Mr. Bob..yeah...Greene...Bingham...Mr. Bob Bingham...[pause]...what was that Cook boys name? [pause] makes no difference anyways, but he was a Cook though and um told me if I could pay 'em six dollars a month why they'd set it in for me, and I had them do it right then. I lived in a little ol' three room cottage down on the campus. They was a givin' me warter and they'd a wired the house and we was a payin' seventy-five cents a month for lights. They sat it in for me and I paid 'em for it. It wasn't long till the improvements come pretty fast for refrigerators. My wife traded in somewhere or the other on someone and got a larger one, and better one. It wasn't long then till we, she bought a...she bought the first stove that we had and I really don't know what...I don't know really what she paid for it...but she bought the first refrigerator, large one, and the first stove. Push that thing off I don't want this...

[tape turned off]

[end of Ed Culler Int.erview]

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