National Canal Museum

Transcript of Oral History Interview of Calvin Cooper

Interview Conducted by Albright Zimmerman and Lance Metz

July 31, 1996

Time: 1:30 p.m.
Place: Home of Mr. Calvin Cooper, 421 Attleboro Village
Date: July 31, 1996
Interviewers: Lance Metz, Albright Zimmerman
Interviewees: Mr. Calvin Cooper

Mr. Metz: Mr. Cooper would you state your full name for the record.

Mr. Cooper: Alexander Calvin Cooper.

Mr. Metz: Do you have any objections to this tape being ~~used~~ archived and used for research?

Mr. Cooper: Not at all.

Mr. Metz: OKay. How were you involved in the Delaware Canal?

Mr. Cooper: Well my mother was from New Hope and my father from Lambertville. After living in Trenton for about 3 years, where I was born, they moved to New Hope. My father bought the coal yard along the canal from Finn Slack and I was probably about 6 or 7 years old at the most at that time. That's how I came in contact with the canal at the beginning.

Mr. Metz: What was your mother and father's full names?

Mr. Cooper: Mother was Marion Oblinger Cooper. My father was Alexander ~~Eli~~ Ely Cooper who went by ~~Eli~~. Ely

Mr. Metz: What was the name of your coal yard, Cooper's Coal Yard?

Mr. Cooper: Yes

Mr. Metz: Can you tell us a little bit about how the coal yard operated?

Mr. Cooper: Well, when it was first taken over there was an old grey mare that used to pull the coal wagon to deliver coal. I don't know how many months after dad took it over they bought a truck. We were all excited about it because he had his name printed on the side of the truck A. Ely Cooper, Old Lehigh Navigation Company Coal, or something like that. Coal would come down by barge from up in the mines and there was a jerry rig there for unloading the coal, outfitted with buckets and the buckets would be lowered on a wire, heavy wire or rope and then lifted up. It was fastened to the horse, and the horse would be whipped and pulled in one direction or another and that would lift up the buckets. From there they would be swung over into a proper bin whether it would be hard coal or soft coal, pea or chestnut or whatever it might be. There were usually two men down in the barge shoveling coal. After they had been there for a while someone would relieve them. It was very hard, especially in the summer. Then my father bought, it was an awful lot of money in that time, around $30,000, a conveyor that would unload the barge. Same principle, the bucket going down and getting filled up by

the men in the barge and lifted, taken over and dumped.

Mr. Metz: Okay, what year would that have been about when he bought that?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, gee, I was afraid you would ask that. Let's see, about 1922.

Mr. Metz: In what year did he buy the coal yard?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, wait a minute then, I was thinking of when he bought the coal yard was about 1920-22. The period I am talking about now was later, about 1928 or 1930. Before my father bought this expensive equipment he went to Trenton and talked to a gentleman down in Trenton. His name doesn't come to me at the moment. The man had been connected with the coal business in Trenton and he guaranteed my father that they were going to continue delivering coal over in Pennsylvania by barge. Well, it lasted about 3 years and then they started to ship coal by rail and I think my father got about 10 cents on the dollar for the equipment that he had spent there. At one point, three other fellows and myself, you remember when they were having a contest, flagpole sitting, bicycle contest, everything, dancing. At my father's coal yard there was a very good opportunity, there was a big circle with an electric pole in the center and I had a bicycle so we worked out a way, the three other fellows and myself how we could ride the bicycle and change without stopping. What we would do would be to ride for an hour and then sit there and watch the other person ride for an hour and just change off 24 hours a day it was going. We went for 13 days and nights and finally our parents made us stop. But when we first started we happened to get some pup tents. I don't know how that came along. We put the pup tents up and were sleeping there. We had kerosene lanterns sitting around so we could see where to go a night. After we were there a short time, a few days, somebody came in with a great big tent. Then they came in with cots for us. Then the electrician climbed the pole and he put up a big spotlight up there so we didn't need these kerosene lights anymore. We would ride around as I said for an hour, watch for an hour and then go swimming in the canal. That was great fun. We would wear shorts and sneakers when we were riding. We kept on the same clothes except for our sneakers and dove right into the canal. Women would come along and bring in a half of a watermelon or a big jug of ice tea or lemonade or something like that for us. Men would stop by, one man in particular who was a bartender in Lambertville about 3:00 in the morning. Every morning he would come. But it was surprising the number of people who would come, no more later than three in the morning, they would come to see it. When we finished my bike wasn't worth much. So I got rid of that. But it was fun. So the canal has always been very close to my heart. It was great.

Mr. Metz: Do you remember much about the boatmen that came, who brought the coal?

Mr. Cooper: Well, some, let's see the fellow in my class, Winters, was one of the boatmen. John. That always looked very exciting. I'm sure there were some boys who wanted to be boatmen. The wife would be on the barge and she would be up there sewing or something like that when the coal was being unloaded. He was the only one, I think from New Hope, and as I said his son Earl Winters was in my class at school. The other part about the canal was the barge rides. That was always great fun. That was a great community activity there. Various organizations would have a boat ride up. Sometimes all the family would take a clothes basket

full of food and we would go up just about to what they called the Cake and Beer House and stop around there and have a picnic and come back again. People, living along the canal, well I know one person anyway. When he had a cocktail party and had any number of people coming, he would hire a barge to leave from down in New Hope, where they leave from now, and go up to his house and come back when he was called when the party was over. That was always very pleasant.

Mr. Metz: About what year would this have been?

Mr. Cooper: Well that was in the 70's. After they were running the coal. Of course they run them now, but I don't know anything about it. I think a group from here went up some years ago and rode and that was always very pleasant, especially on a moonlight night it was great fun and the barge passing one another. I can remember when the coal barges were coming down and they would pass the barges going up, how they would take the line off of the donkey and throw it in the canal. The blowing of the horn was something that stays with you a long time, and the sound of that old piece of conchshell. It was a very beautiful sound.

Mr. Metz: Did you ever get a ride on a boat.

Mr. Cooper: On a coal barge? No. Just on the flat bottom.

Mr. Metz: Did you ever play with any of the kids from the boats when you were young?

Mr. Cooper: No. I don't remember too many kids being on there. No, I never did. Although we got very close to them when they were being unloaded, and we would see the woman up there or maybe she was down, we would peek down and watch her cook, down below. It was quite a thing at one time in New Hope. It would be wonderful if it would come back again. But you know I also remember, I worked with a group of people back in I guess the 50's, when Governor Pinchot was a great man for the coal for the canal. And Earl was good. And then Earl wasn't running, and the next governor, Duff came down to Doylestown for a political meeting and five of us sat in the front row and we had telegrams delivered to him about every 10 minutes.

Mr. Zimmerman: Were you a member of the Protective Association?

Mr. Cooper: Not now, no.

Mr. Zimmerman: Not that year?

Mr. Cooper: Well, I don't think they had it then.

Mr. Zimmerman: Back in the 30's. McNarry was the one that started it.

Mr. Cooper: Oh, yeah.

Mr. Zimmerman: And then Hal Clark picked it up.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, I know. I knew Hal very well, and his son was in my class. A year behind me.

Mr. Metz: But you were saying that you were at this political meeting in Doylestown and you were sitting in the front row.

Mr. Cooper: And telegrams were being to Duff about every 10 minutes. James was a great help to the group. He stated that he and his wife drove from the upper part of the canal down to New Hope one time and she thought that was the most beautiful boat ride she had ever had. It was just great. He was a good friend of the canal's.

Mr. Metz: Who was this now?

Mr. Cooper: James, Arthur James.

Mr. Metz: But Duff wasn't such a good friend of the canal?

Mr. Cooper: Well I don't think he was, he may have been. But it was James who really made his feelings known. At that time there was a group who wanted to fill in the canal and make it into a highway. I don't know how they would have handled it ~~from~~ through New Hope. That would have been awful.

Mr. Zimmerman: But they did take lock 10 out.

Mr. Cooper: Take what?

Mr. Zimmerman: Lock 10 was when you used to go into New Hope and make a 90 degree and then another 90 degree and then they'd.....

Mr. Cooper: Oh, sure the road. So you can't go really south ~~when you open~~ of New Hope on the barge, can you? What happened much later, when I was living outside of New Hope it was much easier to get across from one end of the town to the other with that improvement.

Mr. Zimmerman: The Protective Association bought it.

Mr. Cooper: Yeah. And then there is this spillway just below that into the river.

Mr. Zimmerman: Yes, between 8 and 9 and 10 and 11.

Mr. Cooper: I was wondering if they ever had barges going across there.

Mr. Metz: Oh, yeah. They crossed to the Delaware Raritan.

Mr. Zimmerman: To take coal to New York, in 1848. Was it in 1923 that was the last one to cross.

Mr. Cooper: I'll be darn. That was a very interesting spot, and I never knew the history of it.

Mr. Zimmerman: There was a cable to carry across.

Mr. Cooper: ~~None of~~ I don't know that existed when I was a young man.

Mr. Zimmerman: They stopped using it in 1923.

Mr. Metz: When did your father finally stop running the coal yard?

Mr. Cooper: About 1933 or 34.

Mr. Metz: Did he sell it?

Mr. Cooper: No, he went into a receivership. There was a very nice man who was selling him the coal and he got mad as hell at my father. My father would see people running around in cars. He would say if they would pay me for my coal I would be able to buy a car too. They were hard times. I don't think he got anything out of it.

Mr. Metz: Whereabouts exactly was your father's coal yard located?

Mr. Cooper: Well, it was on Bridge Street, up about 300 feet, I would guess from the intersection of North and South Main Street from Bridge Street. And then of course it ran from there up to the canal. He had a very small office there. He bumped into a lawyer a number of years later who opened his first office in half of my father's coal yard. In fact the lawyer became a judge, Judge Monroe. Then my father had some garages built along the road that opened off, of course, into the coal yard. Adjacent to the coal yard, maybe this isn't of any interest, but I'll throw it out anyway, there was one of the most attractive houses in New Hope, right next to the Methodist church. A woman lived there, Miss Annie Fannie Crook. I think her father built the house, it was a beautiful house, very exquisite, moldings around the ceiling, and very high ceilings. She had attending her a black family, Negro family, afro-American family, or whatever you want to call it by the name of Lee, Harry Lee. Harry had about 7 boys and 2 or 3 girls. Harry would cook for Miss Annie Fannie Crook. His oldest boy would live in the house too and would do all the dusting and housework for her. To get from the Lee's house to the street with a car, you had to go through my father's coal yard. Miss Annie Fannie died and Dr. ~~Laddie~~ Leiby, I think for his services, took over the house. Lee's, most of them are gone now, except for maybe one boy or a girl or two. Alfred Lee, who was just about my age moved to Langhorne here, and I saw him several times. Alfred is now dead. We had the coal yard gang. There were five or seven. A couple of the Lees were too young to play with us. We played baseball and football and we wrestled and we did everything out there. The fellows driving my father's coal trucks, sometimes they would, at the end of the day, they would chip in too and help us with a little baseball. They were great. Ferdinand Hall taught me to drive at age 12. In the summer I would ride in the coal truck out to deliver coal. Ferdinand would drive. After the coal was dropped, I could drive back to the borough limits and then the roads were dirt roads into New Hope. When it came time to get my automobile license, I'd had plenty of experience driving coal trucks.

Mr. Metz: What kind of truck was it that your father had. What make truck was it, do you remember?

Mr. Cooper: I think it was a Chevrolet. Also in the coal yard near the coal bins there was an old building that housed the trucks. Then there was a shoemaker there, oh, not shoemaker, a horse shoer, Ferrier. He took care of the old grey mare and anybody else's horse that needed shoeing. He had blower there and turned it and got the coals good and hot. We used to stand around watching him. That was great fun too.

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

Mr. Cooper: Oh, yes, sure. You know sometimes you would find three hockey games going at once on the canal. At least two, one under each bridge, and one further down. Swimming too was a great sport on the canal.

Mr. Metz: So we were talking about hockey. There was a hockey game under each bridge.

Mr. Cooper: Yep. We used to play, you use the expression kick, the ice when it got soft and you would skate across it and it would go in waves behind you and sometimes you would go right on through. But no one ever drown skating there. Because the water had been mostly left out of the canal. Swimming was also fun at the aqueduct. That is just between the Ferry Street bridge and the Mechanic Street bridge. That was the real big spot for swimming. Some boys, older than myself at that time, would dive from the canal down into the stream below. When they did that there was plenty of mud stirred up. It wasn't very deep, but I didn't do that. There was also a lot of diving off of the bridge. I think I might have done that once off of the Ferry Street bridge. At that time the donkeys could get underneath the bridge on Bridge Street. It was a hump back. And I'll tell you, you'd bump into people from all over the United States and say you were from New Hope. They'd say, "Oh I remember that bridge in New Hope, that hump back bridge. But now I think they have a hard time getting underneath that. In fact it's been dug out and the towpath has been lowered quite a bit.

Mr. Metz: Are there any buildings from your father's coal yard, or are they all gone?

Mr. Cooper: No. Well they are all gone. There was, well I called it an apartment, maybe a two story building put up there. I'd always hoped to have that coal yard some day and put up houses along the canal. That would have been very nice, very pleasant. The garages have been torn down. Where my father's coal yard was at one time was the post office. Then they had stores going up the hill that still exist. The post office is no longer there.

Mr. Metz: Did you ever save any records or did your father ever save any business records from the coal yard?

Mr. Cooper: No business records, no. Pictures that I had of them unloading the coal, the men standing on the barges and so forth, I gave to Jim McGill. You know Jim. He's the mayor of New Hope. He must have other pictures of the canal besides the ones I gave him. Because he goes around giving talks on the history of New Hope, or showing slides anyway of things in

New Hope.

Mr. Metz: Zimm, do you have anything you would like to ask?

Mr. Zimmerman: Do you remember when the playhouse opened?

Mr. Cooper: I sure do. I worked back stage the first summer it was open.

Mr. Zimmerman: When was that?

Mr. Cooper: Wow, was it 1938. I worked back stage the first summer it was opened.

Mr. Zimmerman: How old were you then?

Mr. Cooper: 22 I was in college, working during the summer. Dick Bennett was there, the father of the Bennett sisters. He had a school, in fact, Grace Kelly worked there one summer under him. He didn't have a very good memory. One play I remember he was on the couch, and had a sheet over him and underneath the sheet was a speaker so they could prompt him from back stage. Oh, there are lot of stories. Singen (???) was great fun, a great friend of mine. I haven't seen him for a few years. I saw his picture in the Gazette recently.

Mr. Zimmerman: He came to a Trenton Historical Society annual meeting a year or so ago.

Mr. Cooper: Just a few months ago I saw his picture in the Gazette. We would strike the sets and put up for the next day the new ones and nobody got paid. If he felt in the mood and flush, Singen would take us over to Lambertville to a place called Ledgers and we'd have some beer and sandwiches. There was this one girl working there by the name of ???, her father was vice-president and treasurer of Bloomingdale's Department Store in New York. They lived outside of New Hope, and they had a swimming pool. So we'd all hop in the car and go up and go swimming. Sometimes we'd go bare ass swimming in the river. There would be a raft out there. Male, female, boys, girls, we'd all go in and we'd have a heck of a lot of fun. There was no horse play, but it was fun, just thinking about it, I guess.

Mr. Zimmerman: Was that the beginning of the change in New Hope?

Mr. Cooper: Oh, yes definitely. Before the playhouse came, Tony Sarg had a shop there, and so did Don Hedges, Hedges Craft Shop they called it, on North Main Street. They did very well, and then when the theater came, I don't believe there was more than two restaurants in New Hope, maybe only one of any reputation. The fact is, the Towpath House, off of Mechanics Street, that was very good and Henrietta Cunningham ran it, and she did a good job there. She'd have a, what we'd call a Local Yokel, one night a week when you could go there and you'd have your dinner, pay the regular price for the dinner and then you could have either dessert or salad free. That was quite a bargain.

Mr. Zimmerman: How about the River House which became ??? Chez Odette's

Mr. Cooper: Yeah, well that was changed. Some people by the name of Cooper ran that. I remember the flood of '55. Because my wife worked on cleaning silver and things like that for them, and I worked at the craft shop. Well, we both worked there until the first night, they sent everybody out of town because there was oil on the water. We were working at the craft shop, and dishes and everything were floating around in the craft shop and trying to get things upstairs. Then friends of our down the river, by the name of Sullivans, he was a puppeteer, it came up just under their mattress on the second floor, under their bed. That was tough, hard work. I might as well add, we had tremendous help from the Amish out around Lancaster. They would come in, and they'd have great big, you know what a coal scoop is? It's a wide shovel. They'd have that filling buckets with mud. A group of us would carry them upstairs, and out and we'd say "Let's take a break, let's take a breather." I was smoking at that time, but they didn't smoke.

Mr. Zimmerman: No, they had to keep on working.

Mr. Cooper: There was a place for them to swim that night. That was the only thing they wanted, was a place to swim. Of course people outside of New Hope were very glad to turn over their swimming pools to anybody. They had fun.

Mr. Metz: When did you finally leave New Hope?

Mr. Cooper: Well, in '44 I was in the Navy, sent to Chicago to pick up a amphibious ship, LSM, take it down to Mississippi and out to the Pacific, and while in Chicago, it was at an officer's club, I saw my wife and asked her to dance and we were married two weeks later. When I came back I had a job offer. I was a graduate architect, an architect in New York City. That lasted a little less than a year and a half. I entered a competition, Bloomingdale's house planning, and I took second prize in a three bedroom house. So I thought I was a hot shot and we moved to some friends in Grand Rapid, Michigan and that lasted about a year and a half and I got home sick for the east and we came back to New Hope. We lived up the river by the bad turn there by Phillips Mill and then built a house on Aquetong Rd. and lived there for 35 years. Then moved to Washington, DC. My sister-in-law died, she left all the contents of the apartment to my wife, so we moved down there for two years and then came back here. We've been here almost six years.

Mr. Metz: Is there anything you would like to add about the canal or New Hope that we haven't touched?

Mr. Cooper: Well, the only thing is, I read how the people are being hounded because they built a pair of steps up to the towpath or they built a deck onto their house out to the towpath. They've been here and had this for so long, I think the heckling is unfortunate. Maybe legally they have every right to do what they are doing, but you tell me how's it going to go. Are they going to have to remove their decks and their walks and everything up to the towpath?

Mr. Metz: Probably. What has happened is that, it's one of these things where some of the older people would just take a little bit, but then some people took an inch as good as a mile.

Mr. Cooper: Yes, I understand.

Mr. Zimmerman: I'll tell you, I think that a lot of it has been created by the news. And I think a lot of the people have created a lot of their own problems by shouting rights. From talking to the legal people in the state, both of us have been on the advisory committee where this has come up, nobody is seemingly more flexible than the state people. On the other hand the letters and so forth coming from these rights people seem so damn inflexible...These are our rights. What are you going to do for me. I don't really think it's as bad as it sounds. There's one or two really arrogant s.o.b.s, if we want to say it, who have brought it on themselves. But I think most of it has been blown out of kilter. The first letter that went out was unfortunately overstated.

Mr. Cooper: Well, I've known a number of people who have lived along the canal, and one family in New Hope, they built a three story house, and they came out from their house onto a deck that let out to the towpath. Why I bring this all up, is my son-in-law and daughter live up in South Orange and some lawyers now have gotten together a bill against the electric company because telephone poles have been put on the property line. They've been there for 20 or 30 years, and these lawyers like to raise hell, and make five cents on it. Those poles aren't hurting anybody there, and the people living there, I don't think would say anything about it, except the lawyers come along and think they can make a few bucks. They don't realize they are paying for the few bucks.

Mr. Metz: Yes, the higher rates. Ok, the time is exactly 2:05 p.m. We want to thank you Mr. Cooper for your attention and for letting us use this for research. We'd like to take your picture and Zip would like to take some video of you, if you have no objection. So I'll turn the tape off now.