

Lynn Capps Osteen
Curtis Osteen
Interview Recorded: December 17, 2007
Interviewer: David Schenck
Transcriptionist: Cathy Mann
Date Transcribed: January 2008

David Schenck: So this is David Schenck and it's December 17th, Monday, and I'm here talking with Curtis Osteen and his wife Lynn. If you could just say your name and spell it and that way we've got it all on the record, then we'll start talking.

Lynn Osteen: Okay, I'm Lynn Osteen, L-Y-N-N O-S-T-E-E-N.

Curtis Osteen: Curtis Osteen, C-U-R-T-I-S O-S-T-E-E-N.

DS: We got the first question right. That's good. So we've been talking for a while this morning and we talked some last week and we talked all around what these questions are, but if we just go through them now in a kind of more organized way. So this place that we're on right now, Lynn, was part of your family's property. So tell me how y'all came to this place and I guess you grew up here.

LO: I grew up here. I was born here. Well, I was born in Hendersonville in the hospital in 1959 and lived here all my life until I married Curtis and he had a place at east Flat Rock. And we lived out there for about nine months and then we moved his trailer back down to Rock Creek and we started building our house here in 1980 and we've been here ever since and love it.

DS: And your parents were on that property. Didn't your dad say or did you say he was born on the property eighty years ago?

LO: Daddy's eighty-one years old and he's lived here all his life. His mama and daddy actually moved to Hendersonville for a short period of time and I believe Daddy was born in Hendersonville. But his grandparents, great grandparents, were the first ones to come here in I think about 1870, so my family has been here that long.

DS: And they had a big piece of land?

LO: About nine hundred acres, a big piece that the story that I hear is that my great, great grandfather McDowell was owed a debt after the Civil War and money, of course, was no good then. The Confederate money was no good so the man who owed my great, great grandpa the debt paid him with nine hundred acres here on Rock Creek. And a lot of it is still in our family and hopefully it will stay.

CO: Divided up different ways.

LO: Divided up in different ways and some of it has been sold but.

DS: So how much of it still is in the family? I guess we haven't talked about that. Is it half of it?

LO: No, no, I wouldn't say half of it, probably a couple hundred acres. It's been sold and then some of our family has been able to buy it back through the years, but probably a couple hundred acres is still family owned.

DS: And where did your mother grow up? She told me when we were talking.

LO: Mama grew up on Mountain Valley or Cabin Creek Road as it's called now, just across the mountain from here.

DS: And she and your father have been down there for did she say fifty-two years? No, longer than that.

LO: Fifty-seven years.

DS: Fifty-seven years.

LO: Been married fifty-seven years and lived here on Rock Creek all of that time except when they worked at J.P. Stevens when they first got married. They rented a little mill house for a very short period of time and then back to Rock Creek.

DS: Down in Tuxedo?

LO: Down in Tuxedo, yeah. The Green River Mills it was called then and then later it was called J.P. Stevens Cotton Mill till it closed down a few years ago.

DS: And they've farmed that land the whole time they were there, is that right?

LO: Un-huh, my daddy and mama both have always farmed and Daddy's worked away from home too doing carpenter work at Camp Greystone and Falling Creek Camp. But he's been a farmer the whole time too and plowed mules in these fields. He still plows a mule ever now and then.

DS: Oh yeah?

LO: Yeah, hard work, they've cleaned the fields off, carried rocks, and just made a living here.

DS: Now, Curtis, this is where I'm going to ask you that question I told you I was going to ask you. This is where I decided that Curtis was a smart man. He was talking to Gladson about all the work he'd done up here and what he said was, you turned to your father-in-law and you said, Gladson, you're part of this land here. Not that he'd lived on it but that he was part of it. Can you talk about that a little bit?

CO: Well, he's a permanent fixture around here. I been here, what, twenty-eight years?

LO: Yeah.

CO: I been here twenty-eight years and for years I'd go to work, I worked off from here at GE plant, and he'd be plowing a mule every morning and done have half of a field plowed time I went out at six o'clock or six thirty. And he's been behind a mule and working around here so long he's just like part of the land. He's just like one of them big trees and a rock. He is the land. That's just what I said.

DS: Put so much of himself into it and it's worked its way into him too I guess.

CO: Well, there's so many, been hurt several times and worked hard and went through all kinds of hardships and things and froze to death in the wintertime here cutting wood and stuff. I feel like I'm part of it now but yeah, he's done so much of it for so long, yeah, he's just part of it. He is Rock Creek.

DS: So when you talk about, that's one of the things that interests me is that when you talk about people buying and selling land, you just completely lose sight of the idea that somebody can be part of the land. I mean how can you buy and sell it if you're part of it, right?

CO: Yeah. It's like people come in and change it and have no idea what's went on here before. When I come here, I like arrowheads and artifacts. When I first come here I hunted them all the time and I would dream about who has walked here before I come, you know. I'd think well, not only Gladson and his family but the Indians. People have borned, raised, growed old and died right here in this holler.

DS: It's a long, long way back.

CO: So don't take it too lightly you know.

DS: Yeah, sometimes I think we talk about land like it's separate from people but there's no land that is separate from people at any point along the way. So what are your favorite things about this place? What do you like the best? What do you think makes it different from other places?

CO: I like Lynn.

LO: You like me? (Laughter)

DS: Well, that makes a difference. She's part of the land so.

LO: That's why he's here to start with. I think one thing that stands out to me about living here is the clean air and the clean water that we've always enjoyed, because between here and Pinnacle Mountain there is no houses right now. And we grew up working in the fields and stuff and we'd get thirsty we'd just go get a drink of water right out of the creek and didn't think a thing in the world about it. We never got sick from doing it.

CO: And it tastes good.

LO: It tastes so good and cold. The clean water is wonderful. I just love the mountains and the sounds that we hear in the woods, hearing the birds. You just can't beat it and we've just been very fortunate, very blessed to have had that all of our life.

DS: Any particular places that are special? Curtis, you were talking about those wildflowers up on I call it Wolf's Lair but that's not what you call it.

CO: Long Branch.

DS: Long Branch.

CO: Yeah, it's up at the head of Long Branch. Well, I grew up in Mount Olivet section and I've been in the woods ever since I was real small, all day at a time when I was a kid. But I've never seen no flowers nothing like we have up here at the head of this Long Branch. There's species of flowers that's just breathtaking, a lot of yellow lady slippers and stuff and different kinds, beautiful flowers. And of course, I never did care much about flowers when I was a kid but I would have remembered yellow lady slippers.

DS: Right, you don't see those much. That Turk's cap you were just talking about it was from up there.

CO: He come off the mountain somewhere here. I don't know where he found it at.

LO: There are showy orchids up there. There's trillium, several different colors of trillium.

CO: Blood root, Solomon's seal, there's huge Solomon's seal.

LO: Dutchman's pipe.

CO: Stuff that you don't see other places. I bet there's some kind of bird up there ain't nobody ever seen.

DS: That's right, that's right, like Indonesia. That fella that was hunting ginseng, would that be up there?

CO: Well, there probably ain't none now. He probably cleaned all that out.

DS: That's probably the truth. So as, I know we talked about this some when we were with your mom and dad but, some of the history of the community, some of the big things that happened? You were talking about the textile mill being there and then closing, things like that that have changed the way the people live, that either you've seen happen in your lifetime or are seeing right now. We're seeing a lot of change right now, or things that you heard your mom and your dad talk about.

LO: Like the road being paved.

DS: When was that?

LO: Our road here on Rock Creek was paved about what, 2003?

CO: It's been about three years ago.

LO: 2003, 2004, somewhere along in there.

DS: So from the church down there up it was unpaved?

LO: Yeah.

CO: It's not quite as bumpy as it was.

LO: That's changed a lot the way this area looks right in here.

CO: It's probably more traffic.

LO: Yeah, people coming driving up and just turning around at the end of the paved road and then going back.

DS: Just looking around?

LO: Seeing more cars, yeah.

DS: When did the mill close, that was, was that 80s or was it before that?

CO: No, it was after that, wasn't it? It must have been about '90, wasn't it?

LO: It was probably along in there.

CO: About '90.

DS: Y'all both worked in the mill a little bit but I don't believe either one of you liked it very much.

CO: I worked there about, counting the time I was drafted in the Army, I had about five years and it changed my life. I went to using different kind of language. (Laughter) I couldn't hold my temper. It was a rough job but it was somewhere to make a living.

DS: What did you do in the mill, which job, probably several?

CO: Well, they called it slubber. I don't know. I run the slubber.

DS: I don't know what that means. Do I want to know what that means?

CO: No, but I worked there five years, about five years.

DS: And, Lynn, you were there, didn't you say two weeks or was it five days?

LO: I worked two weeks down there. That's along about the time I started courting Curtis and we fell in love and he hated it so bad and he just give me all this—

CO: I told her to quit.

LO: Yeah, so I did. I quit. I was on third shift.

DS: You thought it was good advice.

LO: I took his advice but just about everybody that's my age or older probably has at one time or another probably worked at J.P. Stevens. My Grandma Ballard, Mama's mama, worked down there when she was just a young girl. They sent kids to work in the mill. They were twelve

and thirteen year old kids back years ago when it was Green River Mill. And it has, it's been a livelihood for a lot of people in this community.

CO: It was a good place to make some money. It didn't pay much but it was enough to get by on. I worked there eleventh and twelfth grades on third shift and went to school.

DS: Now that's a long day.

CO: That's why I'm so educated.

DS: That's it. That's it. That's where you learned all those fancy words.

CO: Done a lot of sleeping in history class in them days.

DS: But your mother is the only person I have ever heard say she was talking about how once she got the spinning machine I guess set up that it was pretty, that the patterns were beautiful like that. I don't know that I ever heard anybody else say that.

LO: She enjoyed her time when she worked there. She enjoyed it.

DS: Sounded like it. Any other big changes in this community? I mean there was the mill and the closing of the mill, the roads coming in. I guess part of what was changing is what we're seeing happening right now.

LO: What we're seeing happening with the developing now, it is just now really getting started here. This is 2007 so I think that's going to change us more than anything else is the developing coming, houses up on top of the mountains and seeing the lights at night that we've always been used to looking out the window and seeing the—

CO: And seeing no lights.

LO: Seeing just the mountains on the horizon and just what's natural, the stars and don't have to wonder if it's a outside light or if it's really a star.

DS: So the first time, how long has it been, how many years has it been that you've seen lights at night?

CO: I may my living making lights at GE. Lynn's hated them and threatened to shoot them all out. It's been about, what, ten, fifteen years?

LO: Yeah, the first outside light that come around here where we could see has been about ten or fifteen years ago.

CO: Up on Pinnacle.

LO: Up on Pinnacle and it's not anybody that we know.

DS: So the only development right now is this right down where the road turns off to Green River, what's that, Rock Creek?

LO: Rock Creek development, yeah.

DS: But there are, you were telling me this morning, pretty good sized pieces of land right up here in this part of Rock Creek that are up for sale.

LO: Right.

DS: Hundred acre, two hundred acre pieces?

LO: Right.

CO: And they're running the bears down on us. We seen more bear signs this year than we ever have before.

DS: Un-huh, people have said that all over.

CO: And they killed fifteen bears right in this watershed right here this year.

DS: So there's just no place for them anywhere else?

CO: They're running and ain't nowhere they can go.

DS: Yeah, I've heard that about bear and I've seen turkeys in places I never expected to see a turkey in Asheville in the city. And deer, we got so many deer, I don't know.

CO: We keep them eat up around here. (Laughter) Not really. I've never shot a deer in my life.

DS: You know you said something the other day, Curtis, it's another one of those sayings of Curtis that I wrote down. We were talking about land and the way the land is and we were talking about trees, talking about a couple of those down out front. I think what you said was trees are our life. Do you remember saying that when you were talking about people that would just cut a tree for no reason being kind of like those people that were slaughtering the gorillas over there in Africa. Can you say some more about that?

CO: Yeah, I can say a lot but I don't know if you'd want it on that thing there.

DS: Well, just censor a little bit of it.

CO: Some people come here from another state and bought some land right over my brother-in-law and they had a real pretty view of the mountains but they got aggravated over a right-of-way and they cut down trees, probably a hundred trees up there right on top of him. And huge trees, it was probably some of them over a hundred years old and just cut them all down one on top of the other and left them laying there.

DS: For spite?

CO: Evidently and I just thought when they were doing it that's just almost like killing somebody or something, some animal because trees are our life. If we don't have trees we don't breathe. I'm not a tree hugger but I ain't above hugging one. (Laughter)

DS: And you like breathing, right?

CO: I love breathing. I've kind of got used to it and I like it. So yes, they are our life. I've seen on TV they claim them big trees are putting off more oxygen than all the little ones put together. Just two or three old dead looking hemlocks will put off more oxygen than half a forest of the younger stuff. I don't know how that is but that's what they said. Yeah, I hate to see them cut them just to be cutting them.

DS: I think we have no idea what we're doing when we cut those big ones. We just think its board feet or lumber or something. We're messing with stuff I don't think we understand.

CO: I've always said that people will do anything in the world for a dollar but work for it and that's about the truth. They'll kill every tree from here to the South Carolina line and not even worry about how beautiful it is. I don't know. It's a waste.

DS: It is a waste. So one thing we were talking about this morning a little earlier was we were thinking about how the land and how people understand it have changed. And, of course, the developers coming in have a different understanding but y'all were saying this morning about the change in generations and that maybe the generation that, Lynn, your father and mother are in they held onto the land but the idea is it shifts to the next generation or the next seems to be different. Can you talk about that a little bit because it seems like what y'all were saying this morning was that one of the reasons the developers are coming in is partly because what Curtis just said, do anything for a dollar without having to work for it but another part of it is how the families as they have changed through the years here in the valley they've changed how they think about the land.

LO: I think that the generation that's going to inherit the land now, they don't want to stay home and work on it. They probably most of them have got jobs away from home and they want the finer things of life maybe that everybody else seems to have.

CO: Or they can't make a living on it.

LO: Or they can't make a living because farming is not what it used to be and then they just, they can see all these dollar signs in their head I guess and it looks pretty good to them so they'll sell it and never be able to get it back probably.

CO: And it's sad.

LO: It's very sad.

CO: It's gone forever.

LO: And what I realize and what I'm grateful for for the land that we have is because my mama and daddy did work to get it and they wanted to get it so they could pass it on to their children and they did do that. And I was telling you, David, while ago that Mama and Daddy

gave me and my brothers and my sister our land here when we were teenagers. So we already had something we knew was going to be ours. We knew we were going to have a place to build a home and to live here and all of us have done that and for that I'm very, very grateful and I love it and I think all my family does love it and appreciate it.

DS: Yeah, they were wise people. It wasn't like you started up somewhere else and had to move back but you had your start and a chance to start here.

CO: But a lot of people won't do that and I can understand why because everybody can't be trusted to be a steward of the land or of nothing else. So they don't trust their children evidently enough to give them a cut of the land while they're young. And like you said, once they move to another town or a city and marry somebody and move up somewhere else then they can't just uproot and come back here then. There are no jobs anyway.

DS: I think if I understood it right when we were talking earlier, these bigger pieces of land that are being sold back up in here are being sold by people who moved out. It's not anybody that lives here that's selling that land. Is that right?

LO: That's right.

CO: Yeah, they inherited it.

DS: And they live somewhere else.

LO: Right.

CO: Done got a life somewhere else in another state.

DS: And so when they consider selling the land like that, not only do they not live here, they don't have as much of a stake in it. But I think they don't really understand what they're selling. I guess that was part of what struck me when you were talking about being part of the land or Gladson being part of the land.

LO: And the prices of it for anybody that's local and have lived here all of our life, the prices go so high that those of us who would really, really love to have it, it's just unattainable to us.

CO: Can't get it.

LO: And so somebody with the money can come in and get it and if they choose to and develop it then we've had it.

DS: So the people who have stayed here and who love it and who might want to buy some of the land to keep it like it is or keep some of it in the family just can't afford it.

LO: That's right, can't afford it.

CO: Some people don't care. A lot of people seem like they just soon go with the wind but we don't. You know, we'd just about as soon die than leave.

DS: So we didn't talk about, I want to introduce something that we didn't talk about and if you don't want it on here we won't do it. But these houses that you've made, Curtis, all these tools and all the things that kind of capture and preserve some of the old ways, can you talk about that a little bit? Just for background here, Curtis has made all kinds of tools that the pioneers would have had, made replicas of different buildings that are around in this area, buildings that have been torn down and has put a whole lot of his life and intelligence into this. Can you talk about why it was important?

CO: Ain't had much intelligence. It takes a crazy man to do it. (Laughter) No, I've always, I think I've always been old. I've always loved old people, old houses, old barns, and I don't know, some people might not think nothing about it but it don't me no good to see them tearing an old building down, an old house that's an old landmark in the community or something. I don't like to see it tore down and I want it left there. And I notice they do that in Mountain City and over in that area, they keep them old barns and stuff there. And I don't like change. I've been accused of not liking change. However, if it's for the better I can go with it. But changing for the sake of change is no reason to change. My mama always said what goes around comes around and I found it to be about true. So I like to hang onto old times and old ways and I build these little houses thinking about how it was back in my childhood and whatever.

DS: So it's a way of remembering in part?

CO: Yeah, and I've thought about things that I forgot years ago while I was building it. While I was building these little replicas I'd think about, I'd remember stuff that I forgot years ago. So it was good. It was an awakening almost here for me. But I like to hold onto the old ways sort of. That's me. My brother writes poetry and some people write songs and whatever and take photographs and stuff, but when you see them little houses that's me. That's what my mind's on.

DS: And your hands.

CO: Yeah. It takes a lot of time but that's what my mind's on, preserving stuff. I've been to a lot of old time shows and stuff over in Tennessee in Norris and the Museum of Appalachia and I love that old stuff and I learn how to do some of it and try to copy, you know, the old ways to do things that they made back years ago. Yeah, I'm interested in that very much.

DS: Well, I told you last time I was here you've got a museum all your own right here.

CO: Well, I don't know about that.

DS: So y'all played music? I guess you still play music. I guess that's related to preserving some of the old things or is it?

CO: We like the old kind too. We like the old claw hammer banjo and fiddle and stuff. That's the kind of music we like.

DS: You play all different instruments. You were playing the flute for me last time, Lynn.

LO: Yeah, Curtis makes some Indian flutes and I can blow a tune or two on one. Curtis taught me how to play when we started dating. He gave me a guitar and he said, well, he can tell you the story of what he said.

CO: Well, we won't go into that.

LO: Anyway, I do try to play the guitar and banjo a little bit. Curtis can play just about anything he picks up.

CO: Not good enough to be called playing it.

LO: But we do like the old time music.

CO: A tune or two.

LO: Old time and bluegrass a little bit.

CO: I've made banjos for several years, made a mandolin. Of course, I've got a lot of stories but not on there. Somebody brought us a TV one time when we lived on the mountain and it was electric. We didn't even have nowhere to plug it up so I took the sides off of it and made me some kind of instrument. I've still got it downstairs. I made it and put () on it and made me an instrument.

DS: Some kind of string thing, huh?

CO: Didn't know, couldn't find nowhere to plug it in. (Laughter)

DS: Probably put it to better use than it would have been plugged in. Y'all were talking this morning about the fact that I guess over in Tennessee there's a lot of people that seem to be interested in that old music but you were saying that if you decide to play some of that, even the older folks, you'd be hard to get five or ten people here together. Can you say a little more about that? What's happened to some of those things?

CO: I don't know what's happened to folk. I seen a fellah on TV and he said rock 'n roll come by and just stole our children. Well, I believe the man was right. He was a black man from Georgia. And he said in his childhood he said all of his family and they all played fiddles and banjos and he said all of them gathered round and enjoyed it, but he said when the rock 'n roll come he said it stole our kids away and he said they never returned to it again. And that's the same way of all the mountain people. The music is just about gone. You've seen a revival of it sort of in the last few years of some of the old music so maybe it ain't gone. But we love it.

DS: So are there, we talked a little bit earlier this morning about all the things that are happening and you've talked about it some here with this machine on. Are there things that you'd like to see protected around here in particular? Are there pieces of land or buildings, things that you would like to see folks hold onto?

LO: Oh yeah, we'd love to see the land held onto for sure. And like Curtis said too, landmarks. Of course, right around here I can't think of too many old home places or barns that is still standing. Most of them people have tore down and then they put up a metal building or something like that. But if there was anymore, there is one thing I think of on Bob's Creek Road that's an old home place where the Levi's lived.

DS: It's still there?

LO: Still there, yeah, and stuff like that.

CO: There's not many left around here.

LO: And I'd like to see, there's waterfalls on Rock Creek Road that is owned by a neighbor of ours. I'd like to see her maybe think about putting that in some kind of a conservation easement if she would, but I don't know.

DS: Well, and I think there are a lot of folks that hope that the Long Branch would be preserved up there some way or other.

LO: That's right, above us, what we call Long Branch, there's what, about seventeen hundred acres, is that right? Do you have information on that?

DS: I don't remember exactly.

CO: I believe that's about right.

LO: Oh, we'd love to see the Nature Conservancy get that and preserve that because of all the wildflowers that we talked about and the animals. There's bear and turkey and wildcats and just all kinds of things that live up in there that where are they going to go?

CO: It's pitiful that children living in cities and towns they have, and people, they have no idea how beautiful that is.

LO: Nope.

CO: It's sad. It's just sad that it's going to be gone and nobody will see it. The kids, they can't ever get it, it's gone.

DS: They don't know what it is now and once it's gone they'll never have a chance to know. Family cemeteries, I guess there are a couple of signs on the way in on Green River Road, are those in pretty safe places or I guess you don't know when people start buying up the land.

LO: As far as I know they are. There is a cemetery on Rock Creek Road down at the fork of the road where Rock Creek forks off, there's a cemetery, it's called the McDowell

Cemetery. That's an old family graveyard that my great, great Grandma and Grandpa McDowell are buried in.

CO: 1890, ain't it?

LO: 1890 was the first grave. That was my great, great grandpa. It's protected as far as I know.

DS: I guess people would, that might be the last thing they'd sell I would reckon.

LO: I hope.

DS: Yeah, we hope. Like Curtis said though, people do anything for money at certain times.

CO: That's bad.

DS: Well, is there anything we've talked about earlier today or last time that you'd like to add on, things that have come to mind in the process of talking?

LO: Let's see. Curtis you were going to say something David asked you to say earlier. Oh, I know. I was going to make a little comparison. Lately we've had a lot of coyotes come in to our parts that we didn't have when I was growing up. But the last few years there are really getting to be a lot of them. And we always loved to hear the whippoorwills at night. We'd go out on the porch just every evening and sit on the porch and listen for the whippoorwills and we hadn't heard them in a long time, couple of years now. And we figure that the coyotes are getting their eggs because whippoorwills build their nests on the ground and we just don't have them anymore.

CO: And bob whites.

LO: And bob whites too, yeah.

DS: They nest on the ground.

LO: Yeah, and we don't hear the sound.

CO: Hadn't heard one in years.

LO: And I said if these developers keep coming in on us kind of like the coyotes, after a while they're going to snuff out the sounds of the mountain people and the homes and the farms of the mountain people that's been here for all these years. And after a while it'll be something that you'll never hear of anymore. It'll be lost. It'll be gone and what a sad thing to lose whippoorwills and the mountain people.

CO: I like that. You done good.

LO: Thank you.

DS: Curtis, you were saying it was like when the settlers came in with the Indians. It was just a huge change that's going to be happening.

CO: We can't even imagine how sad they were when they had to leave here.

DS: And it's a change that's just as big as that.

CO: Don't you know that was terrible. That must have been terrible.

DS: Well, I appreciate this and that's, the whippoorwill, that's something to think about as we finish up here.

CO: Endangered species, I feel like a whippoorwill.

LO: And endangered species.