

Ernest Hofer

Where: Helvetia Community Hall, during the Helvetia Ramp Supper

Date: April 30, 2016

Location: Helvetia, West Virginia

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: M. Mairéad Gaffney

Length: 29:41

Project: Helvetia

Ernest Hofer, born in Helvetia in 1950, is from a family with deep roots in Helvetia. His grandfather was the first baby boy born in the community in the 1870s. Aside from serving in Vietnam for two years, Hofer has lived in Helvetia his entire life. Hofer recently retired from working in the mines, and has worked at the Pickens [Helvetia's neighboring town] Ramp Supper for forty-two years, and the Helvetia Ramp Supper for twenty-five. He is treasurer of the Helvetia Community Hall Association and is a member of the Pickens Volunteer Fire Department. He retired from working in the mines earlier this year.

“People aren't going to tell you where the ramp patch is...that's a well-kept secret and I'm not tellin' you where mine's at! And a lot of the property has been closed to ramp-digging due to the lumber companies, leasing the property. Which...has hurt the ramp suppers a lot. So, you just can't dig 'em.”

This interview is part of a series of interviews conducted with foodways practitioners in Helvetia, West Virginia, as part of the Helvetia Foodways Oral History Project in partnership with the Southern Foodways Alliance. Learn more: <https://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/helvetia-west-virginia/>

[Transcriber's notes: Because this was recorded at the Ramp Supper, there is a din of a crowd in the background throughout. Also, some sections are repeated. Interviewer's interjections denoted in []'s and blue.

00:04

Emily Hilliard:

Alright. So could you tell me your name and where and when you were born?

00:09

Ernest Hofer:

Uh, Ernest Hofer. I was born...in this community in 1950. Uh, lived here all my life, other than...I was in Vietnam a couple years, and, uh, I come back here and...I'm still here! [they both

00:30

laugh] And I, and I actually, as far as the Ramp Supper goes, I worked as a kid here. Probably, mmmm, five years or so, in the, the '60's. Um, then I worked...in different capacities...at different times, and I've been actually *collecting* [money collecting] probably twenty-five years [wow!]. Or more. I'm not sure exactly, so...

00:55

Emily Hilliard:

So you're an expert ticket collector!

00:57

Ernest Hofer:

01:00

Now... [money collector] It's kind of, uh, you're elected for life once you [they laugh]...in a small community, here, once you start to do something, to keep, keep things going you have to participate. [Uh-huh] And, uh...

01:14

Emily Hilliard:

[talking to somebody else] You want to get the records first? [Man speaks] What? [Man speaks] Oh sure, OK. I'll pause it. [tape ends, tape 2 starts] So, what did you do as a kid with the Ramp Supper?

02:45

Ernest Hofer:

Well, you usually worked down in the, uh, area that's serving, 'cause at that time they actually put the food on the table. It wasn't buffet style, it was...you had to put plates and stuff on the

03:00

table and...um, most of the time I got into the clean-up detail. [He laughs] [OK] Cleaning off the table and getting ready for the next [uh-huh] next group. And, uh, of course, that was being in 4-H, that's what they wanted you to, that was part of the community...community service

03:30

as...such. They wanted...you to participate in, uh, in the community [Right] And so... And now most of the young people has moved away. And we don't have the help...that we once did, and I mean there's still a lot of people that come back here and help us and...*complete strangers*, actually, come and help us...for

the Ramp Supper. [wow] I mean, in fact my brothers, they were here awhile, well, the one actually lives here. And the other one...he lives in Falls Church,

04:00

Virginia, and he come in today and I...called him and said, 'come on down!' [He laughs] We're gonna work!

[Some background noises.]

04:05

Emily Hilliard:

Go ahead. [tape 2 ends, tape 3 begins] Um. So how many, h-...do you know how many years this, the Ramp Supper's been happening?

04:11

Ernest Hofer:

Back in the '40's. Either '46 to '48. I'm not positive of actually the first date. But I know that... Pickens has a Ramp Supper and I work at it too, it, it's five miles up the road. And

04:30

there's been some, some debate as to which one was first. [He laughs] [Oh!] I really don't know.

04:34

Emily Hilliard:

So do you, do you have any idea how they started?

04:37

Ernest Hofer:

To make money. [Yeah] I knew, I knew the one guy, it, it's actually the Beech Mountains Sportsman's Club, actually started that Ramp Supper here. But then they needed help. So...they got with the...community here and they...for several years they...put it on together, and then they

05:00

kind of had a...mmmm, a disagreement [he laughs] of some kind! I really don't know...exactly what it, it was about, but-

05:04

Emily Hilliard:

Maybe it was about, how to cook the ramps or...

05:07

Ernest Hofer:

Weeeeeell, it was probably, probably about how to split the money. [Yeah, Emily laughs] It, it had something to do with that. A-a-and so. But.

05:20

Emily Hilliard:

Uh, did your family, do you dig ramps, or did your family dig ramps?

05:23

Ernest Hofer:

Oh, yeah! I dig...I've dug a lot of ramps. I used to donate about, uh, ten bushel to this Ramp

05:30

Supper and ten bushel to the Pickens Ramp Supper [oh, wow!], for nothing. [wow] For a community service... then I was working and I really couldn't work here a lot, so I just dug 'em, dug ramps and...donated that part for my...contribution to the...supper. So.

05:50

Emily Hilliard:

And no, they come from, uh, Webster?

05:53

Ernest Hofer:

06:00

Yes, they buy them off of, uh, some people that dig some over there and...uh...it's hard to find ramps. Because people aren't going to tell you where the ramp patch is. [Right] [he laughs] And, and, and that's a well-kept secret and I'm not tellin' you where mine's at! [They laugh] And...uh...a lot of the property has been...closed to ramp-digging due to...uh, the lumber companies, uh, leasing the property. Which...has hurt the ramp suppers a lot. [I see.] So, you just can't dig 'em.

06:30

Emily Hilliard:

Yeah. Um. So what other, well maybe you could, we could take a step back and you can tell me a little bit about your family.

06:40

Ernest Hofer:

My grandfather...was the first baby boy born in Helvetia. So he, he was here in 18...70, or something like that. And then my dad lived here and I live here and my son lives

07:00

here. So. Um. Which, I have...two brothers and four sisters, uh... One brother lives here. Uh, one sister lives here. And the rest of them, one lives at Snowshoe and then, they moved away. [uh-huh] There's nothing here much anymore for them to do, so, uh...yeah... I'm a, I'm retired now.

07:30

[laughs] In fact! I retired the 8th of April and I said, "I'm gonna retire and then I'm gonna help with the ramp suppers and hunt and fish..." [they laugh]

07:37

Emily Hilliard:

8th of April when?

07:38

Ernest Hofer:

Huh? April 8th.

07:40

Emily Hilliard:

This April?

07:41

Ernest Hofer:

Yeah. This April.

07:42

Emily Hilliard:

Oh! OK!

07:43

Ernest Hofer:

[while laughing] Oh yeah, just happened!

07:43

Emily Hilliard:

[overlapping him] Congratulations!

07:44

Ernest Hofer:

Yeah, about three weeks ago. [Wow!] So. [laughs] I was gonna work here anyway. In fact, last year at work they said, uh...uh... I said, "I want it off." And they said, uh, "weeeeellll, we don't

08:00

know." And I said, "weeeeellll, you don't understand. I've worked, like, forty-two years at the Pickens Ramp Supper and at this one, continuously, I've worked at least twenty-five years. I mean I worked all from different years [somebody shouts "Ernest!"], some years I could and some years I couldn't. OK, let's pause.

[Recording keeps going]

08:16

Supper volunteer:

How many tickets you sold?

08:20

Ernest Hofer:

Uh...277.

08:25

Supper volunteer:

270?

08:26

Ernest Hofer:

Seventy, yeah. 273 and then some kids' tickets, I don't know how many. Maybe ten kids tickets, so that's 280 and probably a hundred down at carry out so that'd be about 380.

[They talk back and forth about ticket counts...]

08:51

Emily Hilliard:

Um, where did you work?

08:53

Ernest Hofer:

09:00

I worked in the mines. I worked on a strip job for about ten-some years, and... And I worked in the deep mines, I worked at...different ones around here. I worked at Spruce, I worked at Sago...during the...explosion. And then I worked... at some other mines, I just now retired from [*Unintelligible* “Cordero Ag” ???]. So...yeah, they said I could go to work for Orange Coal at Grafton,

09:30

but that's seventy miles. And I'm not driving it. My son drives it every day. But [*wow*] I told them I'm, I'm too old for that. So... [He laughs]

09:34

Emily Hilliard:

What did your, uh, parents do?

09:36

Ernest Hofer:

My dad was a mechanic in the timber business. Uh, he worked, well basically, mmmm, all his life doing that, I mean, he, he was actually a mechanic, him and another guy they had down here and what they call the Cheese Haus [*yeah*]. That was a garage. [He laughs] It wasn't a cheese

10:00

haus! [They laugh] They built that, him and, uh, Julian Duke, who lived here all, or basically, most of their lives. They started that garage and they run it for...about five years and then...Dad went to work for the timber company and...that guy, uh, Julian Duke, who moved on to another, I don't know exactly where he went, Ohio, I think. But...

10:21

Emily Hilliard:

And so, then it became the Cheese Haus?

10:23

Ernest Hofer:

Huh?

10:24

Emily Hilliard:

Then it became the Cheese Haus?

10:25

Ernest Hofer:

10:30

No... it sat there, and wasn't nothing for a while, and it, I'm not sure the date it become a Cheese Haus [he laughs], but, uh, [laughs], I hope they don't disown me for telling that, but [he laughs]. But, but, that, that's how it was.

10:41

Emily Hilliard:

OK. And did your mom stay at home?

10:44

Ernest Hofer:

Yes. Well, it was with seven kids [laughs] [*oh, wow!*] So, yeah. And we had a, a small farm, they

done...whatever, so it kept us busy.

10:56

Emily Hilliard:

So, did, did you have animals? Or mostly vegetables?

11:00

Ernest Hofer:

Well, we had animals, we had pigs and cows and, well, that was the animals. We had chickens and ducks [laughs] and you know, rabbits. And, and we eat 'em all. You know, they're wasn't, no, no, they're wasn't no pets at our house. [laughs] The dog, we didn't eat the dog, nor the cat! [laughs]

11:21

Emily Hilliard:

Was it, uh, a milk cow, or beef?

11:24

Ernest Hofer:

Oh, milk cows! Oh yeah, I milked her *every* day. [wow] Morning and night. So.

11:30

Emily Hilliard:

And did, uh, did your parents make cheese, or did you contribute to-

11:34

Ernest Hofer:

No, we didn't make, we didn't make the Swiss cheese. Mom made cottage cheese and butter, but we never made cheese.

11:43

Emily Hilliard:

Uh, well what do you think the importance of the Ramp Supper is to the community here?

11:50

Ernest Hofer:

Oh! It supports this building. As the treasurer, it takes about \$2,500 to \$3,000 a year to

12:00

operate. And that's one of the big fundraisers to keep this hall...functioning [yeah]. So. That's, this is our main...main fine, fundraiser for that reason. Um, so.

12:19

Emily Hilliard:

I know, last year it almost, they almost stopped doing it?

12:23

Ernest Hofer:

12:30

Right. Because the year before we didn't do very well. And the help had slacked a good bit. So... There's a lot of work. A lot. And I mean, and as you, you, you've helped down there, and then cleaning the ramps

and all this, we actually hadn't made, I forget what it was, like \$600. So.

12:50

Emily Hilliard:

[Sounds of footsteps] Go ahead.

12:53

Ernest Hofer:

Two? [tape 3 ends, tape 4 begins]

12:54

Emily Hilliard:

13:00

Um. What were we talking about? The fundraiser? Oh, why it, why it, why...

13:02

Ernest Hofer:

Why it's important? Well, because I mean...uh, like I said, uh, the, the cost of running the building...uh, I mean we pick up other...things. I mean, there're several groups that use this, uh... At one time we was represent..., I was the representative of the VFW, but now, um, [mm-hmm]

13:30

they pick the people at the town meeting in November. So it's kinda like, once you get into something you're kinda elected for life. [laughs] So, I'm the treasurer and have been for, mmmm, twenty-five years. [Wow] So, uh...uh...I tell you it takes a lot now, the 4-H operates here, the Farm Women, they have, uh, weddings, uh, different organizations use it for different things [uh-

14:00

huh]. Uh, they have a first of the month dance, which is, mmmm, I'm not, the restoration, who, Woody he, he's a part of that. And they...you know, restore buildings here in town, and, and keep, try to keep things looking good and of course you've got the Garden Club, who does...they do the mowing and... So there's several, so we've got different people from...different

14:30

groups. The Farm Women, used to have the Farm Men, but they...they went the way of the VFW [they laugh], so...you know, there's not that many people in here, so.

14:38

Emily Hilliard:

Are you, what else are you involved in? Are you part of any other events here?

14:42

Ernest Hofer:

Mmmm, well... I'm in the fire department, at Pickens, which is just up the road about five miles. So, I'm in that. Oh, course... that deal you work at the, I work, I'm in American Legion,

15:00

which we had a Ramp Supper two weeks ago.

15:01

Emily Hilliard:

OK. Where was that?

15:03

Ernest Hofer:

At Pickens. [OK] I'm a cook there. [He laughs] [Oh, OK!] So [he laughs again]...

15:09

Emily Hilliard:

How does it, does it differ in any way?

15:12

Ernest Hofer:

Not really. You'll hear 'em, well, they, they like to argue about "oh, blah, blah, blah, our cornbread is different, and we do it this way, and we do it that way." But, no, there's not a

15:30

nickel's difference in either one of them. [They laugh] So. Anyway. Uh...[he sighs] well right off hand that's about it that I can think of.

15:34

Emily Hilliard:

Yeah? OK. Um. Do you, uh, do you make wine or anything? I know there are a lot of wine makers here.

15:42

Ernest Hofer:

Oh, yeah... I make some! [They laugh] Yeah!

15:47

Emily Hilliard:

OK! Or some other kind of alcohol maybe?

15:49

Ernest Hofer:

Huh?

15:50

Emily Hilliard:

Or other alcohol?

15:51

Ernest Hofer:

No! [Emily laughs] I don't make other alcohol, no, no! I'm not into moon-, I don't like

16:00

moonshine. I don't drink moonshine. And I don't make it. You know? [Yeah] If I liked it, I might be [laughs], I might make it, but I don't...uh...

16:05

Emily Hilliard:

Do you make, uh, grape wine?

16:08

Ernest Hofer:

Yes. Grape wine and elderberry. [Oh, really?] Oh, yeah.

16:12

Emily Hilliard:

So what, what kind of...

16:14

Ernest Hofer:

Mine's not...

16:15

Emily Hilliard:

...a recipe do you use for elderberry?

16:17

Ernest Hofer:

Well, a pint of juice to a gallon of water. Uh...plenty of sugar. Uh...my recipe's a little different

16:30

than some of them. You have to...you have to stop it from working, and some of them uses retarder. I use alcohol. I either use vodka or grain. [OK] Like in five gallons, it would be one, one shot.

16:47

Emily Hilliard:

OK. [Hello!] Um.

END TAPE 16:47