



Voices of Lycoming Oral Histories

Lycoming College Archives - Snowden Library

Oral History of

John L. Hunsinger

Alumnus, Class of 1958

Date: November 14th, 2004

Interview conducted by: Julie Dougherty

Transcribed by: Julie Dougherty

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Interview with John L. Hunsinger November 14th, 2004

Julie Dougherty: It is Wednesday November 24th, 2004 and I am speaking with John Hunsinger who is alum at Lycoming College and is here to speak with me concerning the Civil War Museum. First can you tell me what years you were here at Lycoming College?

JH: 1955-1958.

JD: Did you graduate from here?

JH: Yes, I started in February 1955 when I came back from overseas from the Korean War and then I started college a couple weeks later and went through in three and a half years.

JD: Wow, you didn't waste any time.

JH: No, I was getting old.

JD: Were you a history major?

JH: Yes.

JD: How did you get involved in the civil war museum, how did that all come about?

JH: I was president of Phi Alpha Theta...

JD: Which is?

JH: The History Honor Society of Lycoming College, I was on the provisional board to see that we could get it here and I was the president the first two years of its existence. Years ago I'd been in the drum corps and our drum corps had met at the Old Reno Post which was the Civil War Hall. And I knew that there were relics there. And Dr. Priest was teaching a Civil War class at the time and I was part of that class and we were assigned a major paper which would count for half of our grade. Well, I decided to do one on the armaments of the Civil War. And at that time, it was right before the Civil War centennial and there was very little out on it, it was a very challenging paper to do. But I knew that there was a library in the first floor of the Old Reno Post. So I went up to see if I could get research materials from that library. Well, the old man who was there was of course very cooperative but also at that time the city of Williamsport was talking about making a parking deck out of that area. So I got talking with the guy and he said, "We'll we would like to have something done with this." And an idea popped into my head that that would be an excellent project for Alpha Theta to undertake trying to salvage all those materials because there was a great deal there. So I went back, and as

your paper tells you, approached Dr. Jackson, Dr. Priest and others; from there on it went to the college administration and our chapter decided to do it. And of course my best friend Bob Ulrich got in right almost from the start. And he made a lifelong hobby of it where I didn't. I continued to work with it; I was the curator for ten years until it was transferred to the Lycoming County Historical Society.

JD: And what year was that?

JH: It's on the paper here and I'll find out in just a moment...1968. It was ten years. It was open 1958 to 1968, we started in 1957 to work on it and we opened it April 20th, 1958. And in November of 1968 it was transferred to the County Museum where it was just put in storage. Some years later, about three years ago, they undertook a project to make a special room in the museum which was a replica of the original G.A.R. Post here in Williamsport. Bob Ulrich and myself are now contacted to provide information and so forth, narrative information, of what we found when we founded the museum and so forth. And that's reconstructed, and they used the artifacts that we had brought down that have survived and made a replica of the room and it's an exhibit today at the County Historical Society.

JD: So not everything survived?

JH: Unfortunately no, to be honest-how do you put this delicately-there was leakage and a lot of the important items have disappeared.

JD: For instance?

JH: A beautiful Confederate saber and sash, a second lieutenant's uniform from the Civil War, a blouse, a battle stained order signed by Stonewall Jackson, several valuable rifles and pistols are all gone.

JD: Was this leakage while it was here on campus?

JH: No, no, that was at Lycoming County Historical. They had at that time not too tight of security. Fortunately today, they've changed everything out there and they run it very well today. But for a number of years unfortunately, without naming names, leakage occurred. And we lost-now you must realize whenever you donate something to the County Museum they have the right to sell it, therefore much of this may have been legally sold. For instance, there was a battle flag, from Texas, a Confederate battle flag, a gorgeous thing, and they sold it to a museum down in the south. Because way back when, under McKinley I think or somebody, there was a law that any Confederate battle flags were to be returned to the south. Well not too many people obeyed it, I don't know if they did or not, but we had one and the curator at that time decided it should be taken back there. So it wasn't all necessarily stolen, they may have sold some of this

other material to raise money for whatever since Lycoming County's not a Civil War Museum per se.

JD: Why did it go to the historical museum in the first place; why did this collection leave the campus?

JH: There was a new president at that time, I'm not sure who, who merely pointed out that Lycoming College was not in the Civil War history business.

JD: Was that Dr. Bloomer?

JH: No, it was a man who was here only temporarily, for a year or two.

JD: Dr. Detwiler.

JH: That I don't know, whatever 1968, but...

JD: Yes, that was Dr. Detwiler

JH: At that time they said they didn't think we should be in the Civil War business, and that made sense. And we were down in the Old Angel Factory in Eveland Hall; I'd come up regularly and open it. We had originally contacted Lycoming [County Historical Museum] when we first found out about Reno Post, but they weren't able to take the collection at that time, so that's why it ended up at Lycoming College. The great idea for us, see we were a brand new outfit and we had just been formed in 1956, we formed it because I was president the first two years and we thought it was a neat project. And like all projects you have a few people who work hard and few people who don't and we didn't get help. Fortunately a number of local people, especially Mr. Beam Piper, who was a quite a famous author in science fiction was a great help in our gun collection. And Mr. Chandler in the art department was a great help in helping in the art objects, there were some paintings and stuff. And other people were involved; of course Dr. Priest and Dr. Jackson were super behind us and Bob Ulrich and I worked a great deal. But there were others who helped too. And a couple of years later, like your paper points out, that Joe Hasson came up with the idea of an electric map. And so Joe and another young fellow built the map, and we got some homosote, and they wired it. And he said will you write a narration, so I spent the whole summer writing a narration of the whole Civil War for the electric map. Took it to Dr. Priest, this was after I graduated and I was teaching school at the time, he read it said John, I like the first sentence. And proceeded in a kindly way, and I mean that kindly, to point out where it was defective, which it was. And with his suggestions I rewrote it and then we used it and it turned out pretty well. And he may have pointed out some areas that maybe needed some polish.

JD: And where did this paper go?

JH: I have it, I still have it and I still have a tape recording of it.

JD: I would love to have a copy of that.

JH: Well, okay.

JD: If you can bring it, if you could drop it off I'll copy it and give it back to you. I would really appreciate it.

JH: Okay, yeah. It's a whole history of the Civil War and as people would come in you'd push the button and the light would come on in that area of the United States that it had occurred.

JD: And that isn't down at the museum, that particular part of it?

JH: No, that board was destroyed because when we moved it out of Eveland Hall we had no place to put it, it was quite large. And there was no place to put it; there was also a huge painting of maybe 30 ft. by 40 ft. that had to be destroyed. It was a homemade painting of a camp scene from the Civil War. Though it wasn't in good shape it wasn't in bad shape, but there was no place to put it. And there was no real art value; and a replica of that painting has been painted on the wall of County Museum because I have pictures of it that I'd taken and they replicated it in reduced size at the County Museum.

JD: Well I'm glad to hear that the collection is still there. I had heard that they had a fire or something and all of the material was destroyed, and that's the thought here on campus.

JH: Many years ago there was a fire at County Museum that destroyed their museum but then they rebuilt in 1950 or so, but this collection was not destroyed in that fire. It wasn't there then.

JD: That's wonderful to hear.

JH: We salvaged it, is what happened. Now had we not salvaged it I don't know what they city would have done; they tore down the building.

JD: Now do you have any idea at all how many pieces there were to the collection?

JH: I have a complete inventory.

JD: Can I have a copy of that?

JH: If I still have it, seems to me I turned it over to County Museum.

JD: Well maybe then I can get it from Sandy or Scott.

JH: I don't know if I still have a copy of that or not.

JD: So there was no leakage of parts of the collection while it was still here on campus?

JH: No, we handled it pretty well. We had no major problems. The only major problem we had was...Eveland Hall wasn't used then and we had the downstairs, we had two big rooms and eventually a third room, but meanwhile one of the science professors decided to use it for animal experimentation with rats and stuff and it smelled to high heavens, it was absolutely horrendous the smell. So people come in and they didn't want to stay a while. But for a while we had it without the animals and it worked pretty well when we started the project. And my father painted the rooms and we hauled all the stuff down from Renal Post down to my father's truck and it turned out that some of the shells were still alive. When we turned them over to the County Museum and they immediately destroyed those shells because they had powder in them. None of the shells of course, hopefully, would never fire but there were still some shells with powder in them and they were in a panic about that, not a panic but they wanted to get rid of them.

JD: Now this museum was on the first floor of Eveland?

JH: First floor of Eveland, yes ma'am.

JD: Now how many floors were there, do you remember?

JH: Two or three floors because it was the Angel Factory where the preachers used to live; ministerial students as I remember. We had classes there once but they moved us out right away. I don't think it was used for much of anything. That's why we were able to obtain it for the museum because they weren't using it for much of anything anyway. It worked out quite well, now they eventually tore it down which makes sense.

JD: This is absolutely fantastic to have you here telling us about this because we know so little about it.

JH: This paper by Dr. Priest is very well done because he has some dates that I remember about when. And I was the first cannoneer for Lycoming College. Beam Piper and I took the cannon, and it was a couple of the other boys...

JD: Is it still the same cannon that they use...

JH: No, the cannon that we talked about as the first cannon, was a signal gun which was used by the Burrow's Post of Williamsport. Williamsport had three GAR posts, GAR being the Grand Army Republic. The Reno Post which was the largest, the Burrow's Post which was a smaller post, and then the Ripley Post which was made up of the colored

troops. The Burrow's Post had a little signal gun that had no markings on it, it was not a Civil War gun; it was just a homemade cannon they used to signal things. There was a story that it had been used when McKinley's steamer train came through but we couldn't prove it. So it had no real historical significance, otherwise we would have never used it for a cannon. That cannon is up at the museum now in the Reno Post room, it's still there. But Beam Piper and I fired it. Beam was a character, I was with him and we stuffed it with gun powder and Kleenex, I believe, and he set it off and ran. Because it being a cast iron cannon, we didn't know what would happen. Well the cast iron had not deteriorated so it was fine, and we used light charges. I know one time Beam and I and some of the younger boys, because I was out of school by that time, I mean, the next year we used it. We went down to Western Maryland I think and Lycoming scored a touchdown unexpectedly and we fired it and some lady was standing there with a hot dog just in her mouth and everything went. She just chomped away. She was scared to death. But anyway, last of the interesting things.

JD: Now, did you live on campus while you were here?

JH: No, I was a day student.

JD: A day student.

JH: Yeah, cause I was back from the military at that time.

JD: Were you married at that time?

JH: No, not married, but like many poor kids I was able to go to school because of the G.I. Bill. And I worked twenty hours a week and then went to school, and was busy with Alpha Theta and my studies and I got through school in three and a half years.

JD: Fantastic story.

JH: Well a lot of us did that in those days.

JD: Oh yeah, well I know.

JH: Those were the days. I'll tell you a quick story now about Alpha Theta. I student taught my senior year and I was going in the mornings, I was student teaching.

JD: Where did u student teach?

JH: Up at Roosevelt, last time I was in a junior high. Anyway, I ended up teaching high school. But anyway, towards the end of the year I get called in by Dean Skeath saying "You can't graduate." "What do you mean I can't graduate?" He was very nice but he said, "You didn't go to chapel last semester." And I said "No, I was student teaching."

Tough, so I had to write a long paper on a religion of some type in order to graduate. Those were the days when you went to chapel or else. I didn't mind going to chapel that was fine. And he was very nice about it, but he said, "I have to enforce the rule."

JD: He was a wonderful man.

JH: Oh, I had him for philosophy class and he was funny.

JD: Was he funny?

JH: Well, he had dry humor but he would always pose you a question and you'd answer and then he'd take that down to the limit and saw the limb off, see. But it was fun, and I did well with him, and I liked him very much and he was nice to me. He was very nice about that, he was not nasty.

JD: Who were some of your other faculty members?

JH: Oh heavens, Dr. Priest and of course Mr. Ewing, in all the graduate work I have done he is the finest teacher I've ever met anywhere-high school, college, graduate, anywhere. Mr. Ewing was fantastic. Dr. Priest was excellent. I liked Dr. Weidman.

JD: I get great reports about her.

JH: Quite a lady and she was tough. But...

JD: She wrote a history of the college.

JH: She was great. I liked Dr. Howe in Biology and Skippy Sterling for English. And Dr. Groves, who was just here for a couple of years, he was a brilliant man. He went on to the University of North Carolina very shortly after he left here, I mean he was only here about two or three years and then he went to North Carolina because he was a first class guy. He taught us to think distinctly, we had to write essays of no more than a hundred words. Over one hundred words you got docked. He gave you assignments like "future," "love," abstract subjects, you really had to think and think precisely. Well that helped me cause when I did history papers for Dr. Priest or Dr. Ewing or whoever they were only half a blue book, straight A's. Other guys would write two blue books and get a D. Because he made us think distinctly, and that helped me all my life, it helped me put things together in a more precise way.

JD: I bet that helped you with your teaching later on as well.

JH: It surely did, it really helped. I got a very good education at Lycoming because at that time they had a lot of young professors who were learning to be professors and then went on to other things. And then the old time real teachers like Dr. Priest, he was a teacher, Ewing was a teacher. And they taught. They made you think and Bob Ewing

probably gave the toughest test in the college. If you got an A in Bob Ewing's class, you earned it. He really made you think, I'm not saying others didn't, but Ewing really made you think. And that was good for you.

JD: Yes it was; it leads you in going steady for the rest of your life because you're able to do that still.

JH: Priest wasn't easy, and Weidman was tough. But you must learn to think; very fine professors then.

JD: Now, is there anything else I need to ask you about the museum before we get off that subject completely? Anything else we should know?

JH: No, that paper by Priest there is excellent.

JD: Ok, I will put a copy of that with your interview so you can refer to it. I'm still thrilled to death that it still exists.

JH: I didn't even know it existed. Because it has some dates I couldn't remember, I could look them up maybe but I don't remember exact dates.

JD: Now was the museum manned all the time?

JH: Oh no, only when I came in. I came in on Saturdays or Sundays and opened for a couple hours. And Bob Ulrich would come in. And when Alpha Theta was active some of those members would do it also, usually weekends. Now during the week I would take tours, and in summer time, or winter time, after school or something like that; so there was other help. It was never manned full time and the Alpha Theta kids were busy doing other things because they were students. Some of the students, like Joe Hasson I remember specifically, were very active with it and they opened it more frequently. I can't remember all the kids' names who did work at it over the years but there was a number who did.

JD: Now do you have any idea where the artifacts came from in the first place? Where did the Reno Post get them in the first place?

JH: Well we assumed from the members themselves, because there were over 700 members of the Reno at one time, and there were thousands and thousands of Civil Veterans in the area. In Lycoming County my friend Bob Ulrich has records I think of over 6,000 men who served at one time or another in the Civil War, he has their name, where they're buried, and what regiment they served in. He has made a life long hobby of that. He can tell you just about anyone you want to know about, just that much information and in other groups he has much more. I assumed that they donated them to the post; we'd assumed that, I don't know specifically. But the Sons of [Civil War]

Union Veterans was the group that controlled it when we obtained it because they were the sons of Veterans and they were a very active group in the late 1800's early 1900's, very active, and these guys were now in their seventies and eighties. And a man named Zimmer was their commander and he was the one I dealt with and he was so happy to see that the materials were going to be saved.

JD: And what a service you have performed, to see that it went from there to here and then to the museum is, I mean really you have saved the history.

JH: Yup, kept me out of mischief.

JD: I bet you didn't get into too much mischief.

JH: It was interesting, and I'm not a Civil War buff- I'm really not. I mean I enjoy the Civil War, I read about it, but I am not a Civil War buff. But I thought it was important to save it and it would be a tremendous project for Alpha Theta. We were a history society and we had a painting of a Pennsylvania Buck Tail Sharp Shooter, that has since been destroyed unfortunately, that had to be cleaned. So Mr. Chandler showed Bob Ulrich and a couple of us how to do it. So we had little bars of Castile soap, q-tips, and a little bit of water, and you cleaned a little at a time. This painting was about 5 ft by 3 in. or 3 ½ ft, it was a pretty good size so it took us quite a while to do it. And then Dr. Chandler put a coat of varnish on it for us. But when cleaned that you should have seen what came out. Apparently there was a lot in the painting that you had never seen before because it was so dirty.

JD: Because it was so old and dirty, yes.

JH: Unfortunately someone put a hole through it somewhere and I think it's been destroyed. Again, that was a pretty decent painting; someone knew what they were doing. The huge one on the wall of the camp site was pretty primitive, but this was actually an artist who did a Pennsylvania Buck Tail firing a rifle, but again I think it's been destroyed. There's no replica, but there is a replica of that big one up there.

JD: I'm going to have to go up there and look for that.

JH: Well, it's interesting the kinds of things all over the place. When we were interviewed by the museum, different statements Bob or I made, and as I said Bob was the one who made a lifelong dedicated study of Lycoming County Civil War history and he knows more about the Civil War and Lycoming history than anyone I can imagine. He wrote a book even, a published book, he had inherited many letters from his great-uncles. And they wrote to each other at home and he researched it, put the battles together, and made a regular story using narration.

JD: That's wonderful. Is there anything else I should know about the museum? Which room was this, this one pictured, is that the first room when you went in, can you remember? I just came across that yesterday.

JH: Yeah, there's the painting I was talking about that we cleaned. And that's the Civil War uniform, of course that's gone.

JD: And that's the only photo we have of it. Were there other photos, did anyone take any pictures or photos of it?

JH: Yes, let's turn this off, I brought...