

Gas Rush
Mick Luber Oral History
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Interviewer: JC – Joseph Campbell
Transcriber: NCC

Joseph Campbell: So, today is June 23. My name is Joe Campbell. If you want to state your name.

Mick Luber: My name is Mick Luber.

JC: Okay. We're here at Mick Luber's residence.

ML: Blue Bird Organic Farm.

JC: All right.

Pat Jacobson: We might want to wait a minute until –

JC: Oh, yes. Good idea.

PJ: You don't want to [unintelligible] on the tape.

JC: [laughter] Yes. Good point. Thank you. Luber, okay, great. So, tell me about your people and where you were raised.

ML: I was raised 17 miles from here in Adena, Ohio. My father was a coal miner. My mother was a homemaker, worked at a grocery store, president of local organizations, coal mining community, union member.

JC: What sorts of organizations was she part of?

ML: Band mothers, Cub Scouts.

JC: Did you live in Adena your whole life?

ML: Eighteen years. Then I went to college in Ohio State and taught school in Chicago for a couple years. I tried to start a free school in Columbus for a couple years. I worked for farmers in the area. I was a gypsy carpenter between Columbus, Chicago, and eastern Ohio for a couple years. I worked for the post office,

JC: Jack of all trades.

ML: Carpenter, built houses, barns. That's how I got into farming. My father always had a garden. That's how the union members made it through the strikes and stuff was that they had to produce their own food. He had a farm, but he didn't live on the farm. My mother was from Arkansas, and she was sort of middle class. Her father had a new car every year and ran a bakery. He actually came from Germany to Columbus and then ended up in Arkansas. My father met her in Arkansas.

JC: How? What was he doing in Arkansas?

ML: Well, my grandfather actually had him arrested for stealing \$50, a felony, so he couldn't get, I guess, a passport to get out of the country. There were organizers who were trying to get people to go to Franco in Spain. My grandfather got wind that my father was talking to one of them in a bar. My father said he had no inkling that he should go and fight. So, he went to Chicago, where my uncle lived, and he worked for the American Baking Institute. He said there were no jobs in Chicago that he should go to Arkansas, because there used to be a bakery in Adena that those people left Adena and moved to Arkansas. They went into business with my mother's father. My uncle had worked down there in that bakery. So, he told my dad to go down there. So, my dad went down there and worked in the bakery. My uncle was a sort of a gala. He had on a lot of women. These guys down there found out that my dad was from Ohio. They thought he was my uncle and they beat the shit out of him. He didn't come to work for a couple days. My mother went to find him and nursed him back to health. It almost bit his ear off.

JC: Then they started a relationship from then?

ML: Started a relationship, and they got married. They wanted to get married at Christmas, I guess, or around there. My dad was going around telling people, instead of Merry Christmas, I want to marry Anne. That priest told him that the church would be all decorated for Christmas, so they don't have to buy any flowers. Then they moved, or they came up for a visit. My mother got stuck here for seven years that they were married. She resented it till the end.

JC: Why? What about it?

ML: Well, she always wanted to go back. She only got to go back for visits, and she got tricked. The older you get, the more things that bothered you back in the old days come back to haunt you. So, when she was addled in her later days, she always wanted to go home.

JC: How far are we now from where Adena is where you grow up?

ML: 17 miles.

JC: So, how did you come upon the farm here?

ML: There was a group of people trying to buy a place and put it together as a sort of a community farm. Everybody got basically bought off by their parents. Didn't want people going into communes or doing that kind of stuff. I was packing up my tools, getting ready to become a tipsy carpenter again. I drove down this road and this place was up for auction. They auctioned it off, and I bought it for, I don't know, 21,000, \$22,000, 60 acres, with the house, two barns, about 16 acres of flat ground.

JC: So, most of the land that we can see now from here at your home, I'm assuming you own all these?

ML: [affirmative] Because to a road up on the top of the hill, we have 8 acres up on top of the hill that's flat, and we do these eight acres down here.

JC: How many years ago was that?

ML: Thirty, thirty-two.

JC: Have you changed your cropping over the years? Or what's the 32 years been?

ML: No. I've been organic all that time. I helped start the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association. I was basically a grunt or gopher. I got everything together, helped plan the first meeting. I've been a member of OEFFA ever since. I've been a president. I've received the stewardship award from them.

JC: Congratulations.

ML: Yes. I've been to every meeting since they started.

JC: You probably know (Jeff Sharp?). I worked for a man named Jeff sharp, who I know at one point was involved with OEFFA maybe, maybe he's not.

ML: I don't know. I don't know people's faces, not their names.

JC: Yes. [laughter] So, in the last five or ten years, have you been involved in a leasing activity?

ML: No. I am totally against fracking the whole process, because it's unnecessary and it's just going to pollute all the groundwater in my estimation. I don't like the smell of diesels and I don't like the roar of the – there's a compressor station less than half a mile away from here, down that hollow, and they run it all the time. There are three wells around me that they've fracked, and they're still in the process of fracking over top of this hill. It used to be quiet here, and it's no longer quiet. The first well they put in Harrison County is about three miles from here. A land man came to talk to me and wanted to put a tie in. There's actually a pipeline that runs right across here on my dominion. I told him I didn't want it. They had to put a trip. You know what a trip is. It takes the condensation out of the pipe so that the gas that's going into a pipe doesn't contain the moisture that comes out of the wells. So, they wanted to do that here. I refused to let them go on my property. Thought we had them stopped from doing it. But my two neighbors here caved in and allowed them to put the thing in right over there on the other side of the road. The drip is actually up on the top of the hill.

JC: How long ago was that?

ML: I didn't talk to him for two years. It's been about three and a half years. They used the right of way. They couldn't get anybody to allow them to go across the property. So, they used eminent domain and came down the township road. Township trustees didn't even know that they were coming until they started putting stakes in all the people's yards coming over here. They just came down a county road all the way over here, and then came down the township. But also, the first well that they drilled over here, I caught them spilling stuff down through a stream right below my place. I filed a report with the Ohio EPA about it and got no results from

the Ohio EPA. They said everything was fine. I know that they compromised the well pad up there. What Chesapeake Energy does is they hire a subcontractor to do the basic construction of the pad and drill the first 100 feet. Then they come in with their big rig and actually drill the well. Whoever did the first thing one day, I was walking my dogs down the road. I look at the stream down there, and it's just pure white. I actually have an example of it in the house in a little jar that I shake and go and talk to people about what they can do. I knew they wouldn't believe me because I've always been an environmentalist. So, the woman that lives down the road was on the health department. So, I called her up and we both took a sample at the same time. She took her sample to a health meeting that night. A guy that was the head of the health department saw it. He had worked for the U.S. EPA. He thought there was a problem. He called up Chesapeake, went up around the site to see if the water was running from the site over the top of it, and it wasn't. Then he came down and talked to me, and I walked him up the valley and showed him all the springs that had been compromised with this white stuff coming out of it. Then a troubleshooter came from the Ohio EPA, and he wasn't even going to walk up the valley and look at that stuff. But the guy from the health department told me what time they'd be there. So, I got him there. I cornered the guy and made him walk up the valley and see what was there. Then they sent a guy down here to do the actual study on it. His specialty was the water that runs off of parking lots. He has no idea what was going on with these gas wells. So, I mean, that's what's going to happen with all this stuff. There's just not enough government surveillance of these things. I called the guy from the ODNR who was up on the site to come down and take a look at it. He didn't even return my call. So, six months later, they sent me a report saying that everything was fine on that well pad. But I know everything that's ever spilled on that well pad is going to go down and go into those wells, because the rock structure has been compromised about that water source.

JC: What do you anticipate in the next five years happening around here?

ML: Well, they used to do 640 acres at a site. Now they're doing 1,200 and somewhat acres, and they're going to do them all. I mean, they're not putting all these pipelines in around here and not going to use them. So, every place there's 1,200 and something acres, they're going to be drilling down and fracking it.

JC: Do you mean 1,200 acres of leased minerals around a well pad?

ML: Yes. Well, they took mine. They took my 60 acres. The ODNR just gave them the right to take there's a pooling law in Ohio.

JC: Did you appeal that decision?

ML: What are you going to do? Go out there and say, "I don't want them to do this." They're going to say, "Oh, yes. Mr. Luber, because you're such a nice guy, we're not going to do that." They sent me a nice little letter saying, when Chesapeake Energy gets 150 to 200 percent of their investment in the well, then they'll start sending me royalties.

JC: What does that mean exactly, 150 to 200 percent of?

ML: What it cost them to drill the well? Then in Ohio, they take out water. They take out royalties for transporting your gas for you. I think the state minimum is something like 8.5 percent, they can take as much as 6 or 7 percent for transporting your gas away. So, I could get, who knows, not very much.

JC: Do you have some neighbors that own large tracts of acreage, or is that a lot of smaller subsets?

ML (Kaiser?) owned 240 acres. [unintelligible] goes on 1,000 acres. But most of these little things are 40 or 50 acres. They used to call them quarter or something. People would get it 40 acre tracked. The original Fife Road is after the Fife family, and they used to have 160 acres. Then family took off sections, or sold off sections.

JC: What about the farm here? You mentioned you have paid workers that work here on the farm?

ML: [affirmative] Four, sometimes five.

JC: Where did they come from?

ML They're just local people. They're rejects from people that can't get a job someplace else. They'll come here and work. Kids were picked on in school. Kids never made it through school working on their GED, that kind of stuff. A couple alcoholics I've had. The lower echelons of America are going to crawl around on their hands and knees in America anymore.

JC: Have you had some of the same staff, or whatever workers?

ML: I lost a kid that had worked for me when he was a teenager, I guess. He's worked for me when he was in high school. Then he came back when he was 30, and he worked for me for another four years. Last year, he got a job working for an oil company. Pumped in petroleum for him. He was basically the farm manager. So, now I'm stuck with the people that don't know how to do anything, but they were all his friends, basically.

JC: Do you have certification organic?

ML: Yes. I'm certified.

JC: Do you have concerns about the fracking and how that relates to your organic certification?

ML: Sure. I had a monitor here for a month. There was a particulate monitor, parts per million, and they had a little scale on it. It said 0 to 1,000 was good air, breathable air; 1 to 2 is not so good; 3 to 4 up to where I said, 4 to 5, you don't want to be breathing the air. I ran it for a month, actually twenty-eight days. Out of the twenty-eight days, there were only ten days that were breathable under the limit. Averages were between 14- and 17,000 parts per million, I guess, of particulate matter. Then no specific one. But that's when they were fracking this well up here, and they were running a presser station 24/7 down the road. So, I go to farmers

markets. I sell most of my produce at farmers markets in Pittsburgh. I talk to people, and they ask how you're doing. I'm complaining about this stuff going on around here in the particulate matter and I'm selling them organic vegetables. It's like, do you cut your own throat? Tell people that your nice, clean air is being compromised and their food might be compromised along with it. It's just a terrible place to be. I'm actually an inspector for OEFFA. I inspect organic farms, so I don't know OEFFA doesn't have a set policy on what can be considered contamination as far as these wells are going. I don't think anybody does in the country.

JC: So, OEFFA has an annual conference, right?

ML: [affirmative]

JC: Have they had sessions? Did they discuss the fracking issue?

ML: Sure. Yes. Last couple years they've had sessions on fracking, but there's nothing. It's just how to try to stop it, how to get it to be. I think their big push is to how to make it safe. I don't think there's any way to make it safe. That's just my opinion.

JC: What year were you born or what day were you born?

ML: 1945, April 27th.

JC: Okay. You mentioned that your father had worked in the coal mines.

ML: [affirmative]

JC: What mine and what community in Adena?

ML: That's outside of (Cata?). So, it was Nelms number one mine. I worked there for over forty years. He was a safety man in the mine.

JC: Okay. You mentioned he was involved with the union there.

ML: Yes. That's what a safety man is. He represents the union going through the mine and inspecting it for safety. He was actually a mechanic, but they have committees. He was on the safety committee in the mine. I tried to get a job in the mine, but my hair was too long for them at the time for them to hire me.

JC: Has that changed? I think I've met some miners that have longer hair.

ML: I have no idea. But at that time, [inaudible] him a lot of trouble, because he knew the track really well. So, it kept the mining safe. It was probably one of the safest minds around here.

JC: Is that mine still open?

ML: No. It was sold to somebody else. They have a different portal for it now, and it's owned

by a different company.

JC: How do you think your dad's involvement with the mine and with looking out for the other miners has that – and your mom, you also commented, was involved with a lot of organizations. Do you think that had any effect on you and your decisions to work with OEFFA and be an advocate for organic farming?

ML: Sure. Yes. They were both good, inspirational people, and they worked hard and they played hard. They were very involved in their community. My parents started Young Democrats and were part of the Young Democrats in Adena back in the [19]40s and [19]50s. So, yes. They set good example.

JC: You mentioned you had siblings?

ML: Yes.

JC: How many?

ML: Well, there were three brothers and one sister and one brother died at 4 or 5 days old from something he caught in the hospital from guys coming back from World War II. In fact, that's why I'm here. The doctor told my mother and father to go shoot for another one to keep (Ann May?) mind off of losing a baby.

JC: (Ann May?) was your mother's name?

ML: [affirmative] Both my brothers went to law school and became lawyers, and my sister is a teacher. She's actually a librarian now in a school.

JC: Where are your brothers living?

ML: One lives in North Carolina, actually now. He ran condition bureaus for twenty-five years, or something like that around the country. The other one that is a public defender in South Bend, Indiana. My sister is in Zanesville, White Cottage, actually.

JC: Are they involved in agriculture or farming?

ML: My sister lives on a farm. My brothers both have gardens in their houses.

JC: Because you mentioned your parents were gardeners, correct?

ML: [affirmative] Yes. My father, he had a farm. He used to have plots there. We actually used to torture him. He'd take us up to the farm and try to work. Then my brothers would beat on each other until he was mad enough to take us home and go back and he can do some work. But I discovered after I moved to Chicago, I used to go to (Jewel Tea?) and buy fresh produce all the time. The guy that was running the Jewel Tea stores hands were always split and cracked and oozing things. I asked him about his hands, and he said they suggest he wears gloves. But

he knew it was coming from all the pesticides and stuff on the fruits and vegetables. So, I started thinking about how we had always eaten out of the garden. My parents always canned and got wild meat and mushrooms and butchered with other families, cows and lambs and stuff like that. So, I know good food, and I thought I was putting that [inaudible] seven days a week. So, we farmed on that little buying club. We got stuff out of California, actually, for about twenty families. Then they started opening health food stores in Chicago, and we started patronizing that. Then we moved back here. I moved back here and joined up with Pat and a bunch of other people and helped run a buying club and then open a store here.

JC: So, you've worked together then before?

PJ: [affirmative]

JC: Okay.

PJ: Yes. Luckily, Mick had experience in a buying club, because the other two of us didn't. We just wanted one. [laughter]

JC: Okay.

ML: I used to work for Federation of Ohio River Coops. I used to transport food. I had a little truck, so I go pick up the food for coops and then transport it to sites. Go for this, go for that.

JC: Okay. I don't know if we're supposed to be asking two people at once questions, but how did you two meet? Because you were driving the produce truck, or did that all happen after?

ML: No. She and (Francie Arnett?) put an article in the paper about buying club for me. I saw the article and I went to the meeting. That's how we met.

JC: Oh, okay.

PJ: Yes. For the record, I'm Pat Jacobson. [laughter]

JC: Thank you.

PJ: That was a long time ago. [19]70s?

ML: Yes.

JC: Have you found the market for your produce? Has it changed since the [19]70s?

ML: Sure. It's big. It's got bigger and bigger. I used to go to local markets probably twelve years and they used to be corn and tomato markets. Fourth of July, and it closed maybe in the middle of September. In order to make this work, I needed a bigger window. So, I started going to Pittsburgh, to markets in Pittsburgh. They go from Mother's Day to Thanksgiving. So, you can generate enough volume in order to survive doing this. Plus, now I run a winter delivery

system. I put up a high tunnel and produce stuff there. I carry breads from a bakery. I raise chickens and I have eggs. So, I sell them my eggs for their hall of breads, and they sell me bread to distribute to my customers. Carry a fine chocolate from Akron, Ohio demos and jams and jellies from a guy over in Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania. So, I have a little capital coming in year round.

JC: Has that become easier to organize a winter service or was that harder thirty or forty years ago?

ML: There were no high tunnels thirty or forty years ago, unless you had a lot of money and you had free gas from a gas well. So, it's a recent phenomenon. But I've done it for probably twenty-five years. People that used to belong to the co-op. The co-op has a customer base to do that. We have squash and potatoes and onions and stuff that carry over through the winter.

JC: Could you explain a high tunnel for me?

ML: It's just a piece of plastic over ribs, just like what a greenhouse looks like, but there's no heat in it. There's no ventilation system, except for natural air and windows and doors. You use row covers inside of it to every plastic covering, you get a freeze zone. So, if you have a high tunnel here, and you'll use two row covers inside that, it's like you're down in Georgia. So, it works pretty well.

JC: Do you have a hobby or anything you like to do in your free time?

ML: Reading short stories and reading books can consume a couple a week.

JC: Yes.

ML: Library is my favorite place. Cheap and good quality, especially the Wheeling, Ohio County Public Library.

JC: For summer of 2015 would they recommended reading like that?

ML: I don't know, short stories I just finished, I think her name is McMurphy. It's called the Apocalypse. It's about one of the vignettes in it is about a girl in China who goes and gets a job in the city to get out of the country, and she's basically a slave there. They charge her for food. They charge her for where she sleeps. They charge her for everything. She's sort of captured by that, but she has enough spunk to try to get outside that. So, she and another friend go to a market and start dancing at this market. It sort of works a way of making a little extra money so they can pay off their debt, so they can get out of the place. But there's probably twenty stories in there that are similar sort of things. It's like these guys that work for me. They're sort of in the apocalypse. They're not smart enough to go get a job in the regular industry. They're sort of captured by our culture. They spend their money, not on things to – well, they don't eat this food. They're growing this food but they don't eat this food. They eat junk. They live on

Mountain Dew and cigarettes. So, I mean, it's always good to see the – I'm a peon. I'm a

peasant. I'll always be a peasant, and it's good that I can actually look at it and it's smart enough to walk away. But I felt bad for all the people that can't. When I was a teacher in the [unintelligible] City, it was just a shame to see all these bright minds that couldn't move two blocks away because it was a segregated community. Two blocks away. There were doctors, lawyers, lawyers, people like that in Chicago that couldn't move into a better neighborhood. They were all stuck in the same school and the city, they didn't pick up trash in the neighborhood because it was a black neighborhood. These kids lived on a big boulevard. It could be beautiful, but there was glass and everything strong, everywhere. I took them one day to Lincoln Park, which is on the Lakeshore Drive in Chicago. These kids were so tickled. They just took off their shoes. They're running through the grass, and they're skipping on their ropes and stuff like that. They were just phenomenally happy. So, all those people on the bottom, they got my vote.

JC: Thank you. Is there anything else you want to share, or anything you want to discuss?

PJ: Could I ask you a question?

ML: Sure.

PJ: All right. I'm interested in hearing a little bit of more about the free school that you were trying to start and how that all went well.

ML: It was the starship free school. We had about twenty families that had kids that were going to go to the school. But that was in the same year that Nixon bombed Cambodia, and all the people went into the streets around the university. They arrested people and charged them with \$50,000 bail to get out of jail. We had a co-op. We had co-ops for renters. There was just this whole community organized, and it sort of fractured the community, because they charged these people with high crimes, and nobody wanted to associate. Because where are you going to get the \$50,000 to get out of jail if they think there's some sort of conspiracy? So, it sort of fractured the community.

PJ: That was in where?

ML: It was in Columbus.

PJ: In Columbus.

JC: Where was the free school center, where was it?

ML: Around the university. There was actually a school right above campus, above Lane Avenue, that we had as a proposed site. I still have it somewhere, with the curriculum for the school and stuff like that.

PJ: What ages were the kids?

ML: We were going to start with the kindergarten through like third grade. Then as these kids grew, we were going to expand the school. We had been to the Ohio Department of Education,

or whatever it was at the time, and showed him the curriculum. They seemed to think it was okay. I taught in the inner city in Chicago, and I started by getting up in front of them and trying to teach them. I found out that they could teach each other a lot better than I could. I started importing kids. I was teaching at third and fourth grade. The first day I was there, the kids had these closets with these sliding doors that went up and down on the wall. I'd be trying to teach one class, and these other kids are running in there and hiding. I'm trying to get them out of there. I flew back to Columbus. I got drunk as a skunk and said I would never do that again in my life. Then Monday morning, I got up and got on a plane and went back to the school and stayed there and got put in a permanent class. Then I started using team teaching, and had kids teach each other, and had them do reading groups together. They were great. Got an evaluation at the end of the year. The woman who tried to fire me out of this school, I think, the first day I was there, I was teaching a class. We were going around the alphabet on the top. I had a pointer in my hand, and I let my kids go to the bathroom, which is right next door. I hear the screaming and yelling. So, I still have the pointer in my hand. I'm standing by the door. I'm going to grab these two little kids. One of them was pissing on the other kid, so I grabbed him on the foot by the hands. I still got that stick in my hand. I walk into this vice principal's office. She comes about 4 feet up out of her chair, a white man with two Black kids with a stick in his hand. She says, "I ought to fire you on this spot." In fact, I had been fired from the school about a month before that. On the south side, I don't know, it was a black school. They had hall monitors like every 10 feet. It was Gestapo. They had the kids line up and come into the thing. One day, they called me into the office and they said I had said that I hated Blacks. I hated Black children, and I wanted to kill them all. One of the certified teachers there had heard me say that supposedly. I'd never said that and I was actually living with a black eye at the time, and I wanted to confront that person, but they would never bring it. The woman told me to go downtown. Maybe to some of those white races downtown will give you another job. So, I went downtown. They gave me another job. So, this is the first day after that back in this other school. She was going to read my pedigree, and I said I wasn't doing anything. The stick was just in my hand because of this. She said, "I'm watching you. Get ready." Then at the end of the year, when she came and evaluated this class, you should have seen her. It was like these kids didn't care that she was there. They would walk around. They had learning centers. They're walking around feeling really comfortable. It was great. She wrote me this great, glowing thing, and then she tried to stick me in a EMH class.

PJ: What's EMH?

ML: It's like educationally mentally handicapped. It's just like the worst of the worst. That's when I moved back to Columbus and did this free school. Actually, in Columbus, because I was from the inner city in Chicago and I've been in school, they sent me to the place where kids who come out of jail go to in Columbus. They had padded cells with steel doors on them, down in the basement of this place. I said, "That's okay. I don't want the job." But it's just sad to see what people have to go through and to think what's going on now. I mean, it's the same stuff from forty years ago. Those people were under the same conditions. It's just sad. But it's not just Blacks, it's poor whites too. I mean, anybody that's poor is just disadvantaged in this country. It's sad to watch. I mean, these guys are pretty bright inside. It's just that they've never had some sort of team teaching system other than sitting in your desk and being rigid about things. These people could actually progress, and if they actually had some like experience on doing farming

or jobs outside of sitting. All school is basically teaching you to go someplace every day so that you can get a job in a manufacturing place or something that you go there every day. It's not really there to educate in my mind anyway.

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