

**Union Church Oral History Project**  
**John King recorded by Harry Rice 1-31-01**  
**Tape 1 of 2**

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H.R.: This is Harry Rice and I'm talking to John King at his home in Berea on Wednesday January 31, 2001 and this is an interview for the Union Church Oral History Project. John, I would like to begin by just if you would, identify yourself in terms of where you were born and when and such things as that.

H.R.: So when did you get started in this world? Where did you come from and when were you born at?

J.K.: I was born June 20, 1910, in Pennsylvania, on the outskirts on Pittsburgh, in Wilksburg, really. And my dad was Herman D. King. He was of Germanic heritage and my mother was Annie B. Fraiser and she was of Scottish origin. So that's where my get my love of Scotland.

H.R.: Oh.

J.K.: But my grandfather King was a native of East Prussia and he came to the United States, he escaped the conscription ... I think it was Bismark, I'm not too sure of that. But he came to United States and when he hit here, the civil war started and he was drafted into the civil war on the North side.

H.R.: Oh really.

J.K.: And he was quite an accomplished musician and he made leader of the, I guess you'd call it a drum and bugle choir or something like that. And he was actually in the battle of Gettysburg. But he came back to the East end of Pittsburgh and started a brick yard and made very well. And one incident, he had a good friend in the church and the friend wanted to borrow \$20,000 for business selling and it went awry. The friend wasn't able to make it. So grandpa came and take over the whole debt. And he was known as Honest Charlie King.

H.R.: Is that right?

J.K.: Yeah. Just some side lights. And mother was of course a great cook and she didn't have an enemy in the world. That Scottish came out in her, and ... yeah.

H.R.: Uh huh. Was she born in Scotland or-

J.K.: No.

H.R.: Her family?

J.K.: Her parents were. But she was born in Butler County, Pennsylvania in a little place called ... oh, it's just out of Butler. And just kind of a side line, my wife's mother was born in the same town. And they were raised together, really. And of course, her mother came to West Virginia and my mother came down near Pittsburgh. But she was a great cook and she was very prominent in church work.

H.R.: Uh huh.

J.K.: United Presbyterian. We sang psalms instead of hymns.

H.R.: Just psalms?

J.K.: Just psalms.

H.R.: Never hymns when ... the church you went to as a young person?

J.K.: No. It was United Presbyterian. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And it was a big church, a rich church. My grandpa came as one of the instigators of the church.

H.R.: Is that right?

J.K.: Yeah. But we'd get a lot of preachers in there right from Scotland. Archibald Robinson and ...

H.R.: Uh huh.

J.K.: And I had one brother. He was five years older than I was. And I lived with my mother and dad. They had brought in my mother's sister. She was a school teacher in the Pittsburgh school system and she lived with us. Very cultured lady. And my brother, he went on in to, after he was through high school, he went to work for Westinghouse Electric at East Pittsburgh. And they took him on. He'd work four hours in the plant and then he'd go into training four hours. He stayed that way, oh probably 10 years and then he decided he needed his degree. So he went to Carnegie Tech for 12 years.

H.R.: Yeah.

J.K.: He'd get up, work, go to East Pittsburgh about 4:00, work all day at Westinghouse, come back in and mother would give him his supper and he'd gone to the middle of Oakland of Pittsburgh where Carnegie Tech was and take a couple night courses.

H.R.: Oh.

J.K.: He did that for 12 years and finally ended up with a degree in electrical engineering.

H.R.: So you were pretty much a city person.

J.K.: Yeah, in a way. Of course, we got mixed up in farming and we'd get up to about Butler and we'd spend the summers on the farm.

H.R.: Your father had a farm?

J.K.: Well, it was a family farm, yeah. And of course, dad was really in the shoe business, really. He worked 72 years with this shoe company in Pittsburgh. But he wasn't a big man, but he had that Germanic blood in him and he didn't speak a lot, but he was good living man. That's the local family. Of course, the boys I ran around with in and around Pittsburgh, they always had a gang around the house and mother liked kids anyways. I started selling Saturday Evening Posts and Country Gentleman.

H.R.: Is that right?

J.K.: That lady, the Home Journal. Curtis Publishing Company. So I kind of formed a little organization, I had eight or 10 boys help me sell the magazines. And Curtis Publishing Company at that time offered a lot of incentive for lads to become salesman. They'd give them vouchers and they'd get some kind of a prize if they sold so many magazines. And I was quite interested in the Boy Scouts. That's probably where I got my first in to get into maybe forestry.

H.R.: Oh really?

J.K.: Yeah. And I went in when I was 14. I didn't start at 12. And I became an eagle scout and then when I graduated from high school they made me assistant scout master.

H.R.: Uh huh. How soon after that did you start working for the Forest Service?

J.K.: Well, I graduated in '28 from Peabody High School in Pittsburgh. And I had some classmates, one was Robert Zottick, I don't know whether you remember. His dad was a great orchestra leader. And Robert founded this radio institute in New York City, where they had all the beginning of radio. He had his musical ability from his dad. And another one I went to high school with was a fella called Gene Kelly. Maybe you remember from, movie actor.

H.R.: Uh huh.

J.K.: And we were in the same classes.

H.R.: Is that right?

J.K.: And Gene, he wanted to be an athlete but his mother wanted him to be a musician.

H.R.: Really.

J.K.: He finally made quarterback on the football team, it about killed his mother. At one of the games, he broke his nerves, threw up on her. But he turned out to be an excellent

athlete. He wasn't a big fella, but he had the strength and climbed ropes and I corresponded with him till he passed away.

H.R.: Wonderful.

J.K.: Yeah, that was just ... there's some happy memories there. But to answer your question, in Scouting, I liked the whole program, just the kind of a life I'd like to ... and in high school I had a good botany teacher. And she was bringing me along. So when I graduated from high school, it was '28, it was just about the beginning of the Great Depression, my dad said I can't send you to college. He said what I can do though, you can live with us and I'll feed and clothe you. So I went to work for a couple surveyors, running the chain and all that and driving a truck for my buddy's father, who was in the cement business. I had a lot of jobs like that. Then I developed some interest in forestry. We'd go on all the scout hikes and get in the woods quite a bit and I heard about this New York State Ranger school in upstate New York. And I wrote in and they said yeah, we'll accept you, except since you're a non-resident, you'll have to pay a registration fee.

H.R.: Yeah.

J.K.: And at that time, it's \$25 a year. New York State didn't have to pay and I completed that course in '29. And then the great ball bounced on the nation. The depression hit and I went down to Florida, just after Christmas, to Lake City, tried to get a job with the forest service down there but they weren't hiring anyone. So we painted signs and my buddy and I, for this [inaudible 00:14:35] expedition at St. Petersburg. Every year they have his navel, I don't know what you call it, rowdiness.

J.K.: I had a chance to work about six months in Lake City for the U.S. Forest Service. They were just starting this Ocala purchase down there. And it was a good start. I think they paid me \$70 a month. And of course after room and board and all that. And then, 1930 came, and I had a friend in Pittsburgh who worked in Brookings Institute in Washington D.C. and he had some contact with the chief forester and his whole staff. And he wrote me a letter and he said John, we're meeting with the chief of the forest service and all his staff. If you can arrange it, come on down to Washington D.C. and I'd get you introduced. But I couldn't get free from the little job I was working.

J.K.: So I called him back and he said well, I'm going to be talking to one of the regional foresters tomorrow, are you interested? And I said you bet I am. And pretty soon I got a letter from Washington D.C., will you report to Coeur D'Alene, Idaho at your own expense and you will have a job, spring, summer and part of the fall. And I took that. Well, I started out on a motorcycle. I bought a motorcycle for \$15 and when I hit Wyoming, there were drifts of snow about 10 feet high. I had to sell the motorcycle and go the rest of the way by train.

J.K.: And when I got there, they asked me, what do you do King? Well, I said I'm a graduate of the New York State Ranger School. And I pulled some references to this hard boiled officer. And he said, "where in the hell is President Hoover's recommendation." Then he

handed me a slip, he said, you will be in charge of five laborers. These were old time lumberjacks. They were all old enough to be my father.

J.K.: And he said, your boss of that crew because you can run a compass. So they put on a stage (bus) with this five man crew and sent up to Wallace, Idaho. I don't know whether you heard of the 1910 fire, burnt the whole town out.

H.R.: Yeah.

J.K.: And we got on a stage there. They called buses stages. And that took me up to Prichard, Idaho, where the ranger's station was. We got in there about, oh it was about 1:00 that morning. And the ranger took me up to his galley and he served us lunch. Now I said you take this five men and go up to Flat Creek, that's North nine miles, up to where we have our tents set up. He took this five men and myself, and we got up to Flat Creek, it was just about dark. And we saw the sign. It was across the Coeur D'Alene River. And they had one of these rafts fixed that the current would carry it across on a cable. But the only trouble was, the darn float was over on the other side.

J.K.: So the fellas fooled around and they said, well, now boss, you can go across on that cable hand by hand and bring that boat across. They had their 19 year old up, these fellas would ... they were a great bunch. They would talk to me just like a dad would, you know. And I got along fine with them. And I worked that summer, mapping and cutting down these diseased trees and fighting fire. And then I decided I wanted to come back to University of Pittsburgh and take some more studying. I went in '31, I was offered a job in West Virginia with the Forest Service.

H.R.: Uh huh.

J.K.: A ranger's station there at Thornwood, West Virginia, part of the Monongahela National Forest. And just luckily, the ranger in charge was a graduate of the New York State Ranger School. So he gave me valuable lessons and training and I stayed at that till fall, November. Of course, in West Virginia, when fall comes, they start killing all the hogs. That's all you'd eat for six to eight months, turn the salt side and ... But then in '32, the ranger wrote me a letter and said boy, things are so tough, I'm laying off all the men, I just can't take you on. So I went to work there in the city of Pittsburgh as a tree surgeon. I was young enough and limber enough.

J.K.: It was a big park and we pruned and trimmed these, oh maybe, 30 to 40 inch Oaks and I'd climb up in them with ropes. They didn't have ladders or anything else.

H.R.: Oh yeah.

J.K.: And boy, you developed muscles. They weren't big, but boy you could wrestle a bear with them. And then, at night I went down to University of Pittsburgh and took some advanced botany courses. And I worked under this Otto P. Jennings, who was one of the world's great botanists. And I received a letter from, I think it was Philadelphia, from the Forest Service, they were starting up this new Civilian Conservation Corps, in 1933. And

they said we were gathering together 18 foresters at Parsons, West Virginia, would you report there, I think it was May 15 as what they called the silviculture foreman.

J.K.: Well I went to my professor there at the university and I said, I'm going to have to leave the course and pass it off. And Dr. Jennings, Otto P. Jennings, he said no King, you made good grades in this, he said, I'm going to give you credit for that. And I got down to West Virginia at Parsons, and I met these 17 other foresters. Some of them had Master's from Yale.

H.R.: Wow.

J.K.: And we were all bunked up in this second floor of an old shed there, with sleeping bags. And the C.C. Camps, they started feeding .... just about 300 yards, they were setting up their camp. So we ate over at the camp and we slept in the old horse shed. And they gave us three weeks intensive training. One of the head man from Philadelphia Silviculturist, he was really rough on us as far as training. And when that was over, these 18 men, two were assigned to each CC camp of 200 men. And I got into [seed] program at Glady Fork, West Virginia. And my buddy had his Master's degree in Yale. And we each took 15 of these CC boys and went through the timber stands performing silviculture on these, getting rid of Wolf Trees or trees that were of low value. Releasing the whole string of really good forestry. And these boys were pretty healthy boys.

J.K.: They made \$1 a day. And they sent \$22 of that \$30 home. And they kept \$8 to get their chewing tobacco and all that. It was really a good outfit. It made men out of these boys and it helped these families, these thousands of families that didn't have a penny. And that \$22 coming in once a month was a life saver.

H.R.: Oh yeah.

J.K.: Of course, you could buy hamburger, three pounds for a quarter and a pound of coffee for a dollar. And that program lasted to ... For me, it lasted to, well 1941, because I was in the ... Closing up a CC camp and Pearl Harbor happened.

H.R.: Oh.

J.K.: I got married in '40 and I knew the CC's were going out, because the army and navy were taking them all. There weren't any new ones coming in. And I could see that I was going to be drafted, so I didn't make a mistake either. I got married the day after Christmas in 1940.

H.R.: Uh huh.

J.K.: I married this school teacher. Then after Pearl Harbor in '41, I came back to Elkins, and the forest supervisor said boy we're low on manpower, I'm going to close the CC camps out and you come to work for the Forest Service. And I was on the Monongahela National Forest and we were having a lot of forest fires and I was assigned a district there in Parsons that I'd follow these freight trains up [black water] canyon and set

holes in the road bed. That was one of my jobs. And they'd give me a lot of trouble, those railroad firemen. Then, I knew that even though I was married that I was going to be drafted. So I went down to the Army and they said oh yeah, we have a place for you up in Ohio, with the Signal Corp. And we'll give you a year's training.

J.K.: Well what happens after the years training, well you'll go in the Army as a Buck Private. Oh, there's something wrong there, because I would had this telephone work just down pat ...

H.R.: Oh, you'd been doing that for Forest Service? Telephone work?

J.K.: Yeah. In the CC camp, yeah. I had a regular crew of 15 men and we'd dig telephone pole holes and we'd run up line. The Signal Corp brought in training camp into Elkins. And they built what they call a three cross arm, 10 wire. It went about 50 miles, from Elkins to their maneuvering grounds. And when they pulled out to go abroad, they turned that line over to the Forest Service. And that was one of my periphery jobs you might say.

J.K.: But I finally went down to see the Navy man in Elkins and I said, what can you offer me? He said well, well you're telephonic knowledge, we can give you second class petty officer. And he said maybe a first class. Well that looked pretty good. So I enlisted in the Navy and they sent me up to Rhode Island, Quonset Point. My boot camp, 30 days of shoveling snow. I never saw so much snow in my life. And when we finished boot camp, they shipped us over to Camp Parks, California and right close to San Francisco. We lived it up there for about a month or so and we got under Marine Corps trainers.

J.K.: The one big thing I remember there, California grows this poison oak. And these Marine Corps trainers, they made us crawl around on all bellies all over this place. And they didn't tell us not to build fires and we built fires with this poison oak and the whole darn battalion developed poison [oak]. And one of these big boys from Louisville, he said boy, I wish they could leave this swelling and take the pain away. But the Navy would not even give them any medicine. You had to go to Frisco to get any relief from that darn poison.

J.K.: We were beginning to get well and they shipped us down to Port Hueneme, which is just north of L.A. and it's right on the ocean. We prepared to go overseas, let's see it's a little after the 4th of July. We got on a liner-