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TRANSCRIPT

RECORDING NO.: Tape 1 Side A
INTERVIEWER: Kelly Lally
INTERVIEWEE: Elmer Britt
DATE OF INTERVIEW: 9/4/1987
PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Brownsville, KY
OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT:
EQUIPMENT USED:
AMOUNT OF RECORDING (TAPE/MINIDISK) USED: 22:41
DESCRIPTION OF CONTENTS:

TRANSCRIBED BY: Christie Burns **DATE**: July, 2007
Transcribed with the support of a Transcription Grant from the Oral History Commission of the Kentucky Historical Society.

KEY: K=Kelly Lally
E=Elmer Britt

Italics= emphasis
// = overlapping or interrupted speech
[ ] [not part of recording]
Lapsed time represented in left column by minutes and seconds (i.e. 5:50)
? or * = transcript needs to be checked

0:00 K: This is Kelly Lally and I'm here at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, with Mr. Britt. Today is September the fourth, 1987. When were you born, Mr. Britt?

E: Nineteen-hundred and ten.

K: 1910?

E: Mm-hmm.

K: Where //

E: August fifteenth is my birthday.

K: Oh, you just had a birthday then, huh? Where did you grow up?

E: Brown mill, Kentucky. Edmonson County. That's my native home.

K: Have you lived there all your life, then?

E: All my lifetime. Seventy-seven years.

0:37 K: What were times like for your family during the Depression?

E: Rough.

K: What did your family do for a living? Were you farmers, or--?

E: Daddy, he farmed, sharecropped.

K: How many kids were in your family?

E: Nine.

K: What number were you?

E: [pause] Fourth.

K: Fourth? Right in the middle there.

E: Right in the middle.

K: How did you hear about the CCC?

E: Well, well, it was some lady. She was, had some kind of position around, and I was—He was having her meat ground, and she asked me how would I like to come up to Mammoth Cave, the CC camp. I told her, "Fine."

K: So a lady came around and asked people to join? What year was this? Do you remember around what time?

E: I surely, I came up then in '35, even though, two or three days, you know.

K: How old were you?

E: Oh, well, I'm seventy-seven now. I'd stay up there two years.

K: Uh-huh. And what—you were in—is it camp number one?

E: Camp number one. Five-ten was the number.

K: Five-ten? You didn't have very far to go from home.

E: No. Fourteen miles from here. Down.

K: Did you get homesick at all?

E: Not at all.

K: Did you go home much on the weekends?

E: Every weekend when I went on—you know, KP.

K: Mm-hm.

2:42 K: Did they give you any special training before you started work?

E: Every day we marched out and retreat. We saluted the flag as they raised it, and saluted it as they lowered it.

K: And that's what you did. Do you remember your first day in camp, by chance?

E: First day in camp?

K: Uh-huh.

E: Seem like it was on a Monday.

K: Uh-huh. You remember what you did on that first day? Or was it like all the other days?

E: Oh, [chuckles] like all those days that—The first work I did, I head for the cave. 'Cause all we was scared of snake, and it was pretty near snake time when I came out. Head for the cave.

K: What did you do in the cave?

E: Well, we broke up rocks. And second, we covered them over with sand. And we carried this sand in old boxes, two in front. No, one in front and one behind. They have some of the old boxes now. And we had wheelbarrows, haul it on wheelbarrows. Didn't have no rubber, them rubber—[?] them old steel wheels.

4:05 K: How were you paid?

E: Onced the month. That's labor at five dollars over the table. And twenty five went home. Thirty dollars a month.

K: How did you spend your personal money?

E: Oh Lord. [laughs] I was very careful with it. It went a long way, though, that five dollars go. It was as big as a tub, five dollars, back in them days.

K: So you worked in the cave when you first started work.

E: First started work.

K: Did you have any other jobs?

E: We, I didn't stay in there. That was the first work I did there. And the second job I did, we built—You've heard of Three Springs? We laid a line from Three Springs over to the hotel. I have to, I worked on that, helped to use pick and shovel there. Then after we got so far ahead, it was five of us, had two cousins in there. And we got to pouring the lead. So they picked me out to be the lead pourer. I carved the pipe, muddied it, [?] took his cup and put it around there,

clamp on it. And had a little wagon, pull that along, and get this melt this lead, and I poured that cup full and filled the joint.

K: Okay.

E: And after I done that for several of them, then after it got cool, I pulled back and knock them all, and put them in my kettle. Re-melt it. Lead.

K: Okay.

E: Did that for quite a while.

K: And that was still the piping from //

E: From Three Springs.

K: // Three Springs.

E: To the hotel.

K: And that was for water, is that right?

E: Water.

K: The pump house out there.

E: That's right.

K: I went up there to look at that. It's a nice little place.

6:08 K: Um, did you do that for the rest of the time you were at, in the CC's?

E: Got pulled from that, and I went to the fire tower. Fire tower. Well I could walk from the barrack down up there in five minutes. So I put in a bunch of time up there, watching out for fires. I could call over there to—Brooks Knott had another over there. I says, "Okay before I call the man over there, call down to P.C. Dudley." That's in where the barracks at, and tell him that I located the fire. Get ready to get the boys on a truck and go to it.

K: Go to fight the fires.

E: Fight the fires.

K: Did you have many fires while you were working up there?

E: Yes ma'am. Had lots of them. Sure did.

K: What kind of hours did you work when you were working up in the tower?

E: I put in eight hours.

K: Did you work during the day, or at night?

E: Day. I was a day man. [laughs] I hung to that a good long while. 'Course there was nothing—I played ball.

K: Played ball?

E: Yes ma'am. They picked me out. I played ball, I played third base. We went to Fort Knox and played in a tournament. We won up there. And [?] we went on ahead to Burkeville. We beat them. I played baseball and I played basketball. Not set on bragging, though. [?] picked me out of about three or four hundred.

K: Oh really?

E: Yes ma'am, sure did.

K: Was this a team just for camp number one? Or was it for the whole Mammoth Cave area?

E: Number one.

K: Number one.

E: 'Cause there about three or four companies up there. We was five-ten.

8:00 K: Did many people in the camp participate in the teams? The recreation teams? They did a lot?

E: Yes they did. That's where I got acquainted with Joe Kolesza. He was superintendent here. He was number four, barrack four there. Number four company. And he and I played against one another quite a bit.

K: Really?

E: Yes.

K: I talked to him a few—Earlier in the summer. He's a real neat man.

E: Yeah, he his. He's a good buddy of mine, 'cause we played ball against one another.

K: He's a funny man too.

E: We played softball over here, but going out, we played baseball when we go down Fort Knox, and go ahead Burkesville. Played third base.

K: Third base.

E: Red hot on the spot.

K: So that was on the weekends when you had those games?

E: Weekends.

K: Weekends? Did you practice much during the week?

E: Every evening.

K: In the evening.

E: I was just beat pretty tough. I had to win like a racehorse. I could work all day and run that night and play ball.

K: You must've been in great shape.

E: Yeah, I was.

9:15 K: So you named, you gave me about three of the work projects you worked on. Did you work on anything else after that? The fire tower? Did you stay there until the end?

E: I stayed there 'til the end.

K: Okay, and you, you left the CCC in what year, do you remember?

E: '37.

K: '37.

E: I left from here, and went to Louisville. See, that was during the flood. I thought I'd get up there and get a better job, you know, paying more money. But everywhere we went there was, and cleaned it up and [?].

K: Yeah. That must've been a bad time up there.

E: Yeah, it was. But we found one little job. The fellow had—At the train line, they had a carload of coal. He offered us twenty-five dollars to unload it. My cousin was with me, so I told him, "Let's get it." He said, said, "I don't believe we can do that." I said, "Well I know we can." I never did mind work.

K: You did anyway, then, huh?

E: Didn't do it, 'cause my cousin—If I'd been by myself, I guess I'd've tackled it by myself. [laughs]

10:21 K: Let's see. Um, were there any specific projects that you can say that camp number one worked on that the other camps didn't work on? 'Cause of the area they were in? I think—were they—Where was number one situated?

E: Right about—Not too far from here.

K: Uh-huh.

E: Uh, no, it's getting about three miles.

K: Uh-huh. It's on this side of the river, though.

E: Mm-hmm. Yeah, on this side of the river.

K: Still //

E: They tore it down, and moved over across the river for the JobCorps.

K: Okay, that's right. Um, do you know if camp number one did anything different than the rest of the camps? Did it work more in the cave? Or work more with the quarry? 'Cause I know camp //

E: I don't think it did. [unintelligible]

K: 'Cause I know camp number four did some certain things that the rest of the camps didn't do.

E: Yeah, sure.

11:26 K: Let's see. So how much free time did you have altogether? Do you remember?

E: Free time?

K: Free time?

E: Free.

K: Uh-huh. When you were off work. Did you work mostly eight-hour days and then //

E: Eight-hour days. Yeah, we'd play ping-pong, base—and softball, and volleyball. Played everyday. I was ready to go out. I never looked like I never was tired.

K: You never what?

E: Never did feel tired.

K: Oh, great shape. [chuckles] Um, did you ever participate in any of the education programs that the camps offered?

E: No, I never was offered it. I just had ninth grade schooling. That's where I went.

K: Did you go to town for any recreation?

E: Lord, 'bout every—[laughs] If we played softball, they'd come in from softball played out, I ate out. I was out practically all the time. Big time.

K: Social? You were really social. Did you go to the movies a lot?

E: Mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah. Out to Cave City. Well, they would have us down here to the recreation hall they called Whitby[?] Hall. They'd have us a dance once a month. And they'd have shows down there too. I'd go out to Cave City. That's where I'd go.

K: Well when they had those dances at the Whitby House, did they bring people in? Girls in?

E: Oh yeah. Yeah, they'd bring them in on a truck. They'd send the company truck out. Yes ma'am.

K: When they had those dances, was it for all of the camps, or was //

E: No, it's just for number one. Then number two, and number three and number four.

K: Separately, though.

E: Separate. They had them separate.

K: Um, did many of the guys date local girls? Go out with them?

E: Mm-hmm. Yeah, that's right.

13:33 K: Did many of the CCC boys in your camp play pranks on each other?

E: Oh yeah. Good.

K: Do you remember any of them?

E: [chuckles] No. Yeah. Yes, one time, a cousin of mine, lived right behind us, he'd come in about, oh about, about a month after I did. So they had a tennis court outside, and they told him that the new boys would have to set out there and keep the cows from tracking in on that. He sat out there, he like froze to death. Some guy had to come along and had to play [?] so he told him. He just said that I'm the rascal. Said, "You ain't supposed to do that!" Said he wasn't supposed to do that. He just laughed. He had the biggest laugh over that.

K: Do you remember any more, by chance? Not offhand?

E: Not offhand.

K: Well if you think of some more, just let me know.

E: It's another thing—But anyhow, I don't know if it's supposed to do with anything—My mother, there's a lady come by was taking up money to buy this park land. She asked my mother for a donation, [unintelligible]. My mother gave her a dollar to help to buy this park land.

K: Oh really?

E: Yes, my mother did that. And this lady, she lived out in Brownsville but of course she's dead. I don't know, her daughter might have that record.

K: But your mother donated a dollar?

E: Mm-hmm. She lived right in Brownsville. Yeah, my mother give a dollar to help to buy this park land.

K: That's a lot of money then too.

E: Oh Lord. Big as a basket, almost, a dollar. It was that long ago. And it went a long way. When you spent a dollar, you had something. Yessir, my mother, she gave a dollar on this park land.

K: She must've really—That must've been really important for her then.

E: Yeah, it was. 'Cause this lady, I know she said it might be a benefit for some of your children. And it wasn't—It wasn't many, many years after she done that before I got the call to come up here. And I thought of that. I said that little dollar, simple, little but it's big, it coulda helped me to get in the CC camp.

16:10 K: So, for your family, the park was a good thing.

E: Yeah. Yes ma'am.

K: 'Cause I know a lot of people in Brownsville weren't too happy with the park being developed.

E: That's right. That's right.

K: And some people lost their homes.

E: Yes ma'am, that's right.

K: Um, do you think that the residents in the area—was there any tension with the CCC because they were developing the park, you know, with those residents who didn't want the park there? Do you remember anything?

E: No ma'am. Sure don't.

K: Was it more the park service they were unhappy with?

E: Mighta been, but I never did hear much complaining about neither one.

K: Maybe it was late—earlier on before you got here.

E: Yeah, mm-hmm. Could be.

K: So how would you describe the relationship the CCC had with the local residents in the area? Do you think—

E: Well, I think everything was fine.

K: Um, did any of the CCC boys ever get in trouble in town or anything?

E: No, no one.

17:33 K: Was there much interaction among the different camps? You all didn't see each other very much?

E: No. Only work was when we met to go play ball.

K: Do you feel—How do—Do you feel like the CCC was successful in relieving the effects of the Depression?

E: Huh?

K: Did it make a difference for your family?

E: Yeah, it helped them out. Yes ma'am.

K: Did you have any brothers that were also in the CCC?

E: No I didn't. Had a brother in the Army. World War II. He fought in the battle.

K: In the what?

E: The battle. Over in Germany. He was the third brother. There were four of us boys. Third brother went to Army. Stayed over there in the battle.

K: Do you think that the CCC helped the economy of the local area very much? Being here?

E: Yes ma'am.

K: What do you think was the greatest thing the CCC did while they were here?

E: Well it would be—it was awful great when they found that big Indian down there, and we carried, we carried timber back there, and they built the big steps up there so they could go up there. I was in on that.

K: You were?

E: Oh yeah, yes ma'am.

K: Were you there when they found that Indian?

E: Yes ma'am. I did not worry 'cause we passed, we passed under there, and some of the guys on the ground behind me trying to hold the legs like that. We passed under there, 'bout two or three weeks or a little longer.

K: And you didn't know.

E: Didn't know it. Yes, I carried the timber back there. All the tours, they come through that, they'd have us singing, and it did sound awful. I thought beautiful, that groan, you know, echoes, forest, traveling in there. There were tours come through, they'd have us sing. We'd stop working to sing. I kinda got vain, I said, wouldn't security come through here about then eight hours, sing, in place of work. But I never did mind the work. Yeah, I thought that's about the one great thing. Well, another great thing, when we built that, put that water line from Three Springs over down to the hotel.

20:35 K: What about the roads in the area? Do you think it made a difference there?

E: Yes ma'am.

K: And what about for the military during World War II? Do you think the CCC made a difference for that?

E: Mm, not much.

K: So do you know if there were any problems in the CCC? Do you remember any?

E: No, I don't. Not as long as I know.

K: Were there—How did they handle discipline problems? I mean, you have that many young guys together, there's always gonna be a few.

E: Might gotten into a few arguments. I never did—I stayed up there two years, and there wasn't any fighting. Never did see a one.

K: So what did you do after you left? I know you said you went to Louisville for a while. What else did you do after that?

E: I come back home. I got working around on the farm, had to work it in the tobacco fields, corn fields, hay fields. Always find a little something other to do.

K: And when did you start working up here again?

E: Let's see, the thirteenth of April. The thirteenth of April.

K: Of what year?

E: '80. '86. No, '87. This is '87.

K: Oh, this year. You just restarted up here again.

E: Mm-hmm. This year.

K: Well, let's see. You have anything else you'd like to tell me about your experience of the CCC?

E: No. I think that about capped it all.

K: Well thank you for talking with me Mr. Britt.

E: Thank you.

[CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW]