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Interview with Oral Lee Thomas Regarding CCC (FA 81)

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TRANSCRIPT

RECORDING NO.: Tape 10 Side A

INTERVIEWER: Kelly Lally

INTERVIEWEE: O.L Thomas

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 6/8/1987

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Bowling Green, KY

OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT:

EQUIPMENT USED:

AMOUNT OF RECORDING (TAPE/MINIDISK) USED: 11:22

DESCRIPTION OF CONTENTS:

This is the second tape of this interview.

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
O=O.L. Thomas

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 the second tape of my interview with Mr. O.L. Thomas on his work with the CCC, June 8th, 1987.

O: // taking psychrometer readings. I think it perhaps might've been in the late 1890s or somewhere along in there, or early 1900s, some doctor got the idea that, to build a sanitarium there in the Mammoth Cave, would be good for tuberculosis. It didn't work that way. In fact, it was bad for it. So that didn't last long. But it was just a little sideline, I didn't know whether you might know about.

K: No, I didn't.

O: About the cave or not. But anyway, we had, because of the thoughts about the air conditioning. Once in a while—I know you was asking about some of the camp life—Once in a while, the, a storm or something would knock out the pumps and the water supply. And we would be rationed on water. And in order to take baths, we'd have to go down to what's, where the—Did you go down to ferry? Ferry's not located exactly where it was. It was up the river 'bout a half a mile in the old days. And all the way across there was kind of a shallow place, about, oh, I'd say four feet deep. And there would be a thousand men down there taking baths, at the same time. I remember lots of weekends when the water was shut off due to a storm or something, and we had some mean ones too. Why, we'd all have to go down to the river to take a bath. And by the way, a fellow, if we got a fellow in that was scared of water, you know, and

he didn't take a bath often enough, they'd take him to the latrine, then they'd throw him in the shower. And then they'd do their hair with the G.I. brush and scrubbed, him, and he didn't have to have that done but about once, and he'd go take a bath when he needed it. But all in all, the boys didn't have any trouble to speak of. Oh, now and then they would be a little ruthless, but it didn't amount to anything.

2:00 K: We already talked about the biggest successes of the CCC. What do you consider to be the biggest problem that they might've had?

O: You know, I don't recall any major problem. They were well accepted, I thought, all over the country, as far as I was concerned. I think that it was smiled upon. Because it was a fine project, and the work that they did was well-known by practically all the citizenry. The only courthouse I can think of right now—now they built a number of courthouses. And of course, that was just in this area. Out west, they did a lot of things that we didn't do here. And in the east they did some things. But now they built—Have you ever been to Cumberland Falls?

K: No I haven't.

O: That original lodge was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. And that stone bridge across Cumberland River down there just above the falls was built by them. Excellent work. Of course, they had overseers. But many men. Let me give you an example of one. Very very few of the people that was in those camps were illiterate. However, I had a friend who enrolled in those camps not long after I did. And his sweetheart had graduated from high school. His father had been in the logging business. His name was Cox. I'll think of his first name in a minute. But anyway, he couldn't even read and write. And I knew the girl he was going with and all that sort of stuff here in Bowling Green. She'd write him letters, and I'd read the letters to him. Now this is not to say the man was ignorant, I mean stupid, he was ignorant but he never had the opportunity. His daddy wouldn't let him go to school. Neither one of his brothers had ever attended school. But I'd read them to—well darn. I'd read the letters to Cox. And then he'd want me to write her a letter. And I'd say, "What do you want me to say?" He'd say, "Just say what you'd say." I must've said the right things, because he married her.

K: [laughs]

3:57 O: And then he took a discharge from camp. She managed to get him a job somewhere in the construction business, and he learned it well. Not only that, but I taught him to read and write before he ever left up there. And he was sharp. Didn't take him any time to learn to read and write. Remember that I told you that I also had a hand in the educational department over there. Here I am, a high school graduate, and I'm doing all this stuff too. But anyway, I was a little sharp, if I do say so. But I taught him to read and write. And they got married. And she got him a job with someone she knew that was in the construction business, and he became a millionaire. The last time I saw him, which has been several years ago now, he was driving big long Cadillacs and throwing money around. He started, he went to Louisville, and started his own construction company. I think that was one of my highlights. I think I'm about as proud of that as most anything I've ever done.

K: Oh yeah.

O: I feel I rendered a service to my fellow man. I guess I'm a little conscientious about things like that. You know, I sit in there, that's the reason my eyes are so red. I'll stay up 'til two and three o'clock in the morning, I'm busy writing there now, answering a bunch of letters and some requests for ancestors and so forth. But I think everybody oughta do something. I also write a church bulletin. The pen is mightier than the sword. I've been mowing that churchyard up there now for about three years, so I wrote a letter, editorial the other day in that church paper. And you know what? Last Thursday there were six fellows showed up there and mowed the yard for me. [laughs] I didn't know it would be that effective! [laughs]

K: You're right, though.

O: So last night, they was horsin' me about that editorial. I said, "You know, the pen is mightier than the sword." [laughs]

5:44 K: So after your two years in the CCC, what did you do?

O: Well, I came out and took a job doing this that and the other thing. I was working for the Pet Milk Company. They had a very large plant here.

K: Which company?

O: Pet Milk Company. Had a very large plant here. So I took a job working down there, which was slavery. But I had always fancied that I wanted to be in the selling business. But I had no experience. I had experience, but they didn't know it. You couldn't prove it. But finally some fool came along and gave me a job in the coffee business. And I more than tripled their business the first month I was with them. And that's the job that this letter right here caused me to quit. And the hired man to take my place, and then they discontinued the camp down there.

K: So then you got a job //

O: And they were very sorry about all of that, but that didn't help my financial condition any. But about a month later, Standard Coffee Company was looking for an experienced coffee salesman, and I was the only one in town. So I didn't have any trouble getting *that* job. Oh, by the way, to get this first coffee selling job that I had, I had to post a two hundred and fifty dollar bond. Everything I owned in the world wouldn't have, at that time, amounted to two hundred and fifty dollars. I must've sold the fellow pretty good, for he came to give me the job. And I told him, I said, "I can't take it, 'cause I can't raise the money." So about a week later, he came back, he says, "Can you raise fifty dollars?" He says, "We're determined to give you that job if you can find any way at all to post fifty dollars, and we'll take the rest out of your pay." I said, "I don't have fifty dollars." I said, "I've never borrowed any money in my life." But I said, "I'm gonna try." So I went up to the Citizens National Bank, introduced myself to the fellow, to the banker, I says, "Now, the man's over at the hotel that's wanting to give me the job. You may call him and talk with him." He did. He gave me the fifty dollars. And I got started in the selling business, and I've been in it ever since.

K: Except you also were in the Air Force during World War II?

O: Spent three and a half years in the Air Force.

7:46 O: But let me tell you a little about my selling experience in the insurance business. After I got out of the Air Force in '45, I went in the insurance business. And the highest echelon you can achieve in the life insurance business is known as the million dollar roundtable. And for thirty years, I was the only MDRT between Louisville and Nashville. One of the companies that I represented started what they called the "Continental Club." See, you could choose a Cadillac or a Continental if you were their company leader. They did that ten years, and I won six of the ten. I got into the estate planning end of it, see, there's a lot of tax advantage in some life insurance. I'm not trying to sell something here, 'cause I'm retired now. But anyway, I got to doing a lot of business with the big farmers around all over the country. Some of them had as much as six thousand acres of land. You see, inheritance tax was a monster. I've known of a few cases where they sold everything that people had, and it just paid the interest on the tax due. So I cut all those clippings out of the papers, and I'd show them these people, scare the daylights out of them. "What can I do?" Then I'd show them my tax book. Boy, you'd be surprised at the attorneys and accountants that I've pounded back in holes, 'cause they fight you. You see, the bigger the mess that anybody's estate's in, when they pass to the great beyond, the more money the attorney and the accountant gets out of it. And the better prepared he is, the less they get out of it. It hasn't been too long, too many years ago, when one of the leading accountants here in town told an automobile dealer that I didn't know what I was talking about. And I said, "You call him, make an appointment with him now." 'Cause I said, "He's gonna retract that." We went over, he says, "My tax book don't say that." And I laid it out, mine, on his desk, and I said, "Yours is just like mine." I said, "Now you tell this fellow straight." Well he looked at my tax book, he said, "I don't remember seeing that in there." I said, "Well you're supposed to be a CPA." I said, "You better dig your book out here." Well he was all apologies. He got his book out, it had the same paragraph in it mine had, and he had told him I didn't know what I was talking about. People don't challenge O.L. Thomas. I'm a fighter. If you haven't been able to tell it by the past, than you're pretty dumb.

K: I can tell.

O: Nobody challenges me. Nobody tells me that there's something I can't do. 'Cause if it can be done and somebody has done it, I think I can. I might just improve it a little bit. [laughs] Yeah. I went out, when I was in the Air Force, for a baseball team that had four major leaguers on it. And everybody laughed at me. They said, "Well you can't make that team." I did. Then I was made an instructor over at Scott Field, just out of Saint Louis, and I spent all of my time over at Sportsman's Park. I only had to be on the field four hours a day, and the rest of it I took infield practice, stayed in the dugouts with the Cardinals. I knew every major leaguer in both major leagues in those days. I'd send all those signatures home, and all those autographs and all that sort of stuff to the various different people that I knew that loved that kind of stuff.

K: Well, do you have anything else you'd like to tell me about the CCC?

O: Do you have any more questions?

K: I'm finished with my questions.

O: Well, I can't think of anything else. If any—I could tell you one story, but I'd better not on this tape. I told it to what's-his-name.

K: Bob.

O: You know the one I'm talking about?

K: No, I didn't hear the story, but he was gonna let me listen to the tape, but I haven't had the chance yet.

O: Well I tell you what, if you'll turn it off, I'll tell you the story.

K: Okay.

[CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW]