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Interview with James Ashby Regarding CCC (FA 81)

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TRANSCRIPT

RECORDING NO.: Tape 14

INTERVIEWER: Kelly Lally

INTERVIEWEE: James Ashby

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 8/19/1987

PLACE OF INTERVIEW: Louisville, KY

OTHER PEOPLE PRESENT:

EQUIPMENT USED:

AMOUNT OF RECORDING (TAPE/MINIDISK) USED: 15:24

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
J=James Ashby

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

[CONTINUED FROM Tape 18.doc]

0:00 K: This is the second tape of my interview with Mr. James Ashby. I know that there was—One camp was all black.

J: Yeah.

K: Number one. How did the local residents feel about that? Was there any racial tension, or how did the CCC boys feel about that too?

J: Well, back then, you know, there was segregation. As long as they were segregated, I think everybody was happy. But well, it wouldn't have done then to put them together, 'cause boy, there would've been, probably would've been murder. [chuckles] Even yet, you know, I don't think in the Army and places, they don't intermix too well. People are becoming more accustomed to it. But that's the way—Well I don't think the local people liked it too much. There wasn't too much they could do about it. Of course, back then, even the government practiced segregation. There's no doubt about it. Segregation was practiced, I expect, more universally when the Democrats were in than when the Republicans were in, but now the Democrats take all the credit for Civil Rights and all that junk, but they, 'course the South was always solidly Democratic, you know. I used to be, I was a democrat, and I voted for Roosevelt twice. The last time I was overseas when he was elected, when he died. But I always tell people that I didn't leave the Democratic party. They left me. It was taken over by the northern

liberals, you know. I'm not ultra-liberal. I'm more or less conservative. A few things that the liberals like that I think is alright. I think that a woman should be able to have an abortion if she wants it. I think it should be up to her. But otherwise I don't believe in this, oh, hiring someone simply because they may be a woman, or because they may be a black. I can't see that. If they're qualified for the job, I think that's fine. But special privileges just because a lot of us can't help it—Many people who are working now started off at their jobs, white people and black people too for that matter, started off at their jobs at a very low wage, and worked their way up to get the experience. And that's the way things were back then. I just don't believe in that at all. Up to a certain point, I believe in equal rights. Equal opportunity, but I think it should stop right there. Because I sure never was hired because I was white. I had to be qualified. And I had to get the experience. Didn't put me in a job which I might not be qualified. People don't have sense enough to realize it, but this is one of the reasons for inflation. High cost of living. Putting people in jobs into which they're unqualified. They don't produce. And that raises the price on the product they sell. And in the long run, all these welfare programs and things of that sort, people don't have sense enough to realize that ultimately, the taxpayers are the ones that are gonna have to foot the bill. The government's not footing the bill. I just don't believe in that kind of stuff at all. I don't think the people need government aid now. As I say, back then you never heard of food stamps. But you got relief, but you only got the staples. And 'course people now can buy candy with food stamps and all this stuff, and they buy everything under the sun on the black market with food stamps. I just don't believe in all that stuff. Uh yeah—

3:23 K: You don't remember any instances of racial tension?

J: Uh, no, no, I don't. There wasn't too many blacks in Cave City. When I lived in Drakesboro and Central City, they had—Drakesboro had a large black population back then. But they were segregated, but there was segregation, but I know that my father—'Course he was a strong believer in segregation, he didn't like niggers at all. [chuckles] And a lot of times they would gamble with blacks, you know, and drink with them. [laughs]

K: Yeah.

J: But publicly, they didn't associate with them, you know. [laughs]

4:03 K: Well um, what kind of relationship did the CCC have with the people of the surrounding area?

J: Well, I would say all in all it was good, but not with everyone. Because it was—In many—A lot of times—You know, as I say, it was people who, boys who had records, some of them. And some of them—I would say not the majority of them. A lot of them were good boys. And uh, lot of them were uneducated, and I think a lot of people resented, resented because of that. They sort of, uh, didn't associate with us too much. Didn't get too friendly with us.

K: Was there much tension with the CCC or the government? I know a lot of people were displaced with the forming of the park, and were really unhappy about the work that was being done. Did the CCC get any of that negative attention?

J: Not that I recall. Uh-uh. No, not that I recall. Yes, I remember when Mammoth Cave was not a national park. I remember when it was incorporated into the government. But most people

uh, wanted it, because it would—you know, same old story, bring more money into—For monetary reasons. They figured it would help the local economy. I guess it does. But many times I think it destroys, also helps destroy the park. But I suppose nowadays you would have to make any area you wanted to preserve a national park because the realty people, or the so-called developers would go in and destroy it in nothing flat. I understand that Yellowstone National Park is just about ruined, because they have built up all around the fringes of Yellowstone now. And the animals are wandering into these areas and people are resenting that. That kind of thing. That's another thing. I am an animal lover. And we destroyed the animals' habitat, they had no place to go. We go out in the woods and exploring and messing around, and all that stuff, and then if an animal attacks someone, why, they shoot it. You know. But that's their home. The same with dogs. This thing about dogs that bite someone. You know, they say well, if a dog bites someone, they oughta be shot. That's stupid. That, those two bears that ate that child up in New York City. I think that's terrible to shoot those bears. I mean, where are the bears gonna go? You know, they've been in that little old cage for thirty-five years, and the kids knew better than to go in there. They were placing themselves in jeopardy. The thing was fenced, and they got in there. They should've put the parents in jail for letting them do that. Someone said, "Well they had to do that to placate the parents." I said, "But they should've put the parents in jail." I'm a firm believer in discipline. I think parents should be responsible for their children. Babysitters and all that stuff, I think that's ruining our civilization. If both parents go to work [chuckles] I don't think they should have any children. I think it's fine for a woman to work, both parents to work, but I think it's hard, a detriment to society and to the child. I don't know how I got off on that.

K: It's okay.

7:30 K: Well how successful do you feel the CCC was in relieving the affects of the Depression?

J: Oh, I don't know. I don't think they were very effective. Actually, the Depression ended—Roosevelt, he realized, even before Pearl Harbor that our defenses were in a sad state. And they were. And he started building up these super battle ships in the Navy, and the Army too. He started building that up before, before World War I. Before World War II. And I think war work actually is the thing—World War I, World War II is really the thing that brought us out of the Depression. Because this powder plant across the river here, my goodness, they worked thousands and thousands, and they were here from New York City, all over the world I guess. Uh, I remember they ran—back then, as I say, not many people had automobiles, and they ran commuter trains out of Louisville over to Charleston back then. And they ran four trains a day, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. And they used steam locomotives, freight engines, steam-built Machado locomotives. I don't know if you know what that is or not. 2-8-2's, eight wheel drive. And they had old heavy passenger cars, steel passenger cars. They knocked all the seats out of them, and put in wooden benches, one along each wall, and then a double bench down through the center. And I think it cost you fifteen cents or sixteen cents or something like that to go over there, and sixteen cents back. And uh, those things would be loaded, just from the people here in Louisville. And uh, but that brought a lot of money into the area. And a lot of work. And really, war work is what ended the Depression. Then of course you know after the Depression, people were starved for everything, and boy, things they boomed, and they've been going up ever since. That really accelerated our recovery.

K: Well do you think the CCC helped at all?

J: Oh, I think probably, yes. I think they kept a lot of people from starving, probably, and gave a lot of boys something to do. My brother, as I say, he was in the CCC's in—I think he was in Idaho, way out west there. And of course, those are all—Those were all forestry camps. Gosh, they fought forest fires and all that. So they were a big help, they did a lot of good, really, not only for the environment, but also for the people involved. And kept a lot of families from starving to death.

9:58 K: What do you think was the greatest success of the CCC?

J: Well I think it, I think it prepared a lot of boys for the service, the discipline, and the—I think it helped build the young men up, because I say, a lot of them had been hungry, and they had not had enough to eat. Most a lot of the had not had discipline or a rigorous life as the CCC was. 'Course just about everything was rigorous back then. And I think it helped a lot in preparing them for jobs later on, and especially for a service, service-related jobs. I think it helped a whole lot, get a lot of experience. It helped me somewhat, 'cause I had always been more or less a free soul. My mother, my mother watched us very closely, 'course I say, back then women didn't work. And she always taught us wrong from right. I was telling my sister the other day, you know I said, well, she was very strict about sex and the girls and things like that, you know, and boys. And she taught us a lot of good in that respect. I told my sister the other day, I said, you know, I used to resent it when I wasn't real good looking and wasn't a woman's man and that kind of stuff, and girls were not attracted to me. But I said, you know now that I've gotten older, I am just so glad that it was that way, because no telling what might've happened to me. [laughs] I've never fathered any fatherless children, and I have never had any sex disease, never been involved in anything like that. And I'm just so glad of that, that mother taught us that way.

11:59 K: Were there any problems that you could see with the CCC?

J: Any problems? I—No, I don't—No, I can't think of any. They did the purpose that they were supposed to, to do very well. 'Course, I guess like every other government thing, it was more or less a waste of money. 'Cause I'm sure it cost a lot, but prices were so cheap back then. Food, food was so cheap. Everything was. I don't know, I don't know what those retired Army officers made when they put them on active duty as the head of a CC camp, but I'm sure they made a lot more than they would have from their retirement pay. I really don't know. But it was good in a lot of ways, I think. 'Course I didn't like it. I never liked, I've never been one to like formality and regimentation. I just don't like that, conformity, be like everyone else. I'm just not like that. I can't be like everyone else. But I'm not everyone else. I'm unique. I'm different. But I just can't see being one in a crowd or anything. But I made it. It was hard for me. When I went in the Navy it was difficult, because I had never been through such, never been through such rigorous training. I mean, strict discipline back then. I'm sure it was much more rigorous back then than it is now. You didn't, gosh you didn't have all the things you have in the Navy now. Now they have ice cream parlors aboard ship, and all that kind of stuff. We did have movies when I was in the South Pacific.

13:46 K: Did the CCC help you prepare for the Navy?

J: Oh, I'm sure it did, yeah. Yeah, I'm sure it helped a lot. If I was just going in there cold, I'd've probably died. I thought I was gonna die. [laughs] And it like killed me. I had never—I grew up in the country, and you can just roam around free. It was a great feeling to be free. I could just go out fishing almost anywhere, anytime I wanted to. Uh, there was a lot of ponds and

lakes, and we could go out skinny dipping, and a lot of times I'd go out skinny dipping, be in the lake or the creek all day long, you know. My skin is so fair [laughs] when I would come home at night, my face would be as red as that carpet and peel off. But it was fun. I had a wonderful childhood. I didn't have anything, no money, nothing to spend. Once in a while I would—I shined shoes when we were at Drakesboro, and back then you got ten cents a pair for shining shoes. And a lot of times, gosh, I would make maybe a dollar a day. I was—an old saying we used to say then, I was nigger rich. I'd buy fireworks, and I remember I used to like sour pickles, and little Saul Wes's store in that old building where the movie was, I was telling you, in Drakesboro. And I'd go in there and get me—You'd get a pickle and some crackers. Great big sour pickle, about that big, and some crackers for a nickel. And they'd have them in a big barrel, you know, you reach in there with a fork. [laughs]

K: Well I need to turn this off now.

J: Sure!

K: Thank you very much.

J: Alright!

[CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW]