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Interview with Smith Meredith (FA 81)

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The following is an unrehearsed interview with Mr. Smith Meredith on his work with the CCC at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. The interview was conducted by Kelly Lally near Mammoth Cave on June 19, 1987.

Lally: The easiest place to start is to ask me...or ask you, when you were born.

Meredith: July the 20th, 1911.

Lally: And...where did you grow up?

Meredith: Right here.

Lally: This area?

Meredith: Yes, born in Edmonson County, stayed in Edmonson County till I went to Two Turns. Stayed there 29 years and come back here.

Lally: What were times like for you and your family during the Depression?

Meredith: [chuckle] They was hard. I kept a job pretty near all the time...but I made it. I worked in timber, worked at a sawmill, was a carpenter, blacksmith and, uh, but you couldn't...wouldn't hire you for nothing...[not clear].

Lally: Anything and everything you could do?

Meredith: Yeah.

Lally: How old were you around the Depression? In your early twenties...twenties, or...?

Meredith: Well, I was born in 1911 and I'd a been...oh, around 20...18 or 20.

Lally: Did you still live with your family at that point?

Meredith: Yeah, I stayed at home till...22 years old before I married.

Lally: How did you hear about the CCC?

Meredith: [not clear]

Lally: How were people selected for the CCC in this area, or did they...?

Meredith: I don't know. The county attorney, the prosecuting attorney, turned me in. Me and him was good friends. And the assistant superintendent come over here one day and told me that...come over there and join.

Lally: So you just joined up... What year did you join in?

Meredith: I believe that paper says '38.

Lally: '38? And you stayed in till 1940?

Meredith: Yeah, they discharged me December the 20th. Now, I went to work for Two Turns December the 12th. I got off a few days and went up on another job and then went back to work and they discharged me.

Lally: So you were in for about two years. Which camp were you around?

Meredith: Number 4.

Lally: Number 4?

Meredith: In Fork's River. I don't know if you know where it's at or not.

Lally: Fork's River?

Meredith: Uh-hmm.

Lally: Were you...you were already married?

Meredith: Yeah.

Lally: When you came...

Meredith: Yeah. See, I was too old for the CC but [not clear] in camp...had to take care of one barracks. I had 35, maybe 40 men in there sometimes [not clear].

Lally: Where did your family stay while you were...?

Meredith: They stayed here on the farm part of the time, and finally they moved over there at the park in the winter...right at the camp.

Lally: So you had...had some men under you, so to speak, in the barracks?

Meredith: Yeah...about anywhere from 40 to 35. And I had two assistant leaders to help me. They was in the barracks. They made me sleep in the middle of the camp, and I had an assistant leader at each outside door.

Lally: What did they do...keep everybody in line? [laughing]

Meredith: No, they couldn't. I know one morning I got up and...one man would sweep half of it and another man'd sweep another half and they just sweep till they went through the whole building. And two boys couldn't get along and I was making up my bed and they started right at my bed and [not clear]. And they'd bump one another with the broom handle [not clear]. [laughter--Lally] I just got ahold of them both and put out the front door and when I did I put [not clear] sergeant [not clear].

Lally: Uh, how were you paid? What was the salary?

Meredith: Well the salary when I went there was, uh, a dollar a day. And board was included. Then they raised it to \$36 a month and to \$45. But the first rate when I got in...just a few weeks, then it wasn't long it went up to \$45. I got \$45 [not clear].

Lally: And, uh, well, like, I guess it wouldn't have been...it would have been a little different for you, but did a lot of guys still send their money home to their family or automatically...?

Meredith: The boys were supposed to send so much to their daddy or mammy or whoever they were related to. They just got so much and rest of it went home.

Lally: And since you were already on your own family...

Meredith: Now I simply don't know how they paid me...whether they paid me all of it or whether they sent some of it home. Course you made...you got that extry [not clear] and then they run out of barbers and I barbered for awhile [not clear] and I couldn't get two. And, uh, the man said just go ahead and cut hair and charge ten cents a head and I made [not clear].

Lally: Extra money [not clear]. That's original. Gotta do it any way you can, I guess, huh?

Meredith: I had plenty of [not clear].

Lally: Aside from supervising the men in the barracks, what other...did you work on any projects here in the park?

Meredith: Yeah, I was a stonemason. And I worked in the blacksmith shop some. And I built the exchange house right there where the hotel's at; they tore it down. And I built two rangers' log cabins where them towers are at. And over on the hillside I built a big incinerator on a steep hillside, and it was 24 foot long and about 12 foot wide and had [not clear] come out like that. Every time it came up a foot, they'd cut off six inches and then fill it full of dirt and a truck could back up on it and dump that garbage on the incinerator. And it...they tore it down. And I built a chlorinator for...the main chlorinator for the hotel and now it's still standing. The two log cabins, I done extry...I made boards and put on some houses. I'd cut a tree and put [not clear] put down three...put down two, then you put one over the front, then you put [not clear]. I made one of the ferry houses down there on sledge hammers. When the river would get up, put a bulldozer to it and take it up the hill; when the river'd go down, put the bulldozer to it [not clear]

Lally: Hmm. Did you do the foundations to the, the ranger houses that are in the...?

Meredith: I built, uh, the foundation to the superintendent's home and, uh, built the foundation to the ranger's home [not clear]. And did a whole lot more work on it.

Lally: I've seen some of your work. I've been looking around out there...

Meredith: [pleased chuckle]

Lally: It's really good. Did you do the pump house out at...

Meredith: Yeah...down there on the hill down there? Yeah. I went over there and tore down a whole lots of...most of that and then built a new one.

Lally: Did it your way? [laughing]

Meredith: No, it was on a blueprint.

Lally: You didn't?

Meredith: Superintendent called me over [not clear] and that's what made me leave. They's two of them bosses drawing \$165 a piece and I was [not clear] tearing the building down. And that utility garage...I built at the oil house out there...where they keep the oil and paint [not clear].

Lally: I've seen that. Uh, where did you get the material, the stone?

Meredith: They quarried on the hillside over there somewhere. Jack Johnson, I think, [not clear] ...asphalt man [not clear]. He was boss...he had a bunch of boys and he blew it out of the ground.

Lally: And you say you also did some blacksmithing?

Meredith: Yeah, I worked with the blacksmith for awhile and got down to stonemason [not clear].

Lally: They find something you did well and they kept you with it. [laughing]

Meredith: I loved that. [not clear]...been forty years [not clear] loose dirt down there on the river bank and I never [not clear] and before the week was out, I was loading 90 truckloads a day [not clear]. And I enjoy bulldozing in case of emergency [not clear]. They tore down...tore up [not clear] and I went down and weren't no driver and the mechanic was there and he started it and I drove it out to Number 2 camp to put a [not clear]

Lally: Did you have much interaction with the other camps even though you were...?

Meredith: No. [not clear] I went down to [not clear] and built a house [not clear] and Number 2 come over there and helped me and that's...I didn't have much to do with other camps. I stayed in my own camp.

Lally: How many men did you have working for you when you were...?

Meredith: I believe there was four or five to 20. I believe this paper says 15 to 20. That was the average, I guess. [pause] I would say it averaged from ten to 15. Sometimes I just had two or

three and sometimes I had a great big...it'd depend on what I was doing. If I had right smart of a job, I had more men and, sometimes, didn't have too much to do... [pause] It's in there somewhere...wonder where it is?

Lally: Yeah, about 20, it says.

Meredith: I'd say it was 20 men on a detail.

Lally: Depending on what you were doing?

Meredith: Yeah. I laid the foundation for the superintendent's home [not clear]. What is his name now? Seems a mighty nice man.

Lally: So a typical day's work...or was there no typical day's work? [laughing]

Meredith: Well, it was all about the same. And, uh...about the only thing different was Eli, my assistant, would take care of the grass and, uh, when I was on fire detail [not clear]. I lived right there at the side of the road and, uh, the dump driver drove the truck...drove the tools...he'd unload the [not clear]. He'd come on down to the house, I'd get him and we'd go to the fire. Then the foreman [not clear] and we was the first ones to the fire and [not clear].

Lally: Did you see your family very much? Did you go...?

Meredith: Well, we lived there...

Lally: Yeah, after...

Meredith: I'd come home when we lived on the farm every week. [not clear]

Lally: How much free time did you have?

Meredith: We were supposed to work eight hours and, uh, I didn't want to even act like a foreman. I just tried to work with the boys and learn them all I could. I done...most of the time, I worked right with them and told them what they wanted to know that I knew. And if they got something I didn't know, I said I'd find it for them...try to find an answer. [not clear] kids 14, 15, 17 years old. I tried to learn them what I could and what I didn't know I'd try to find the answer for them. Course I had be foreman when I was out there, but I didn't feel like...[laughing]

Lally: You acted like one of the guys?

Meredith: Yeah. You'd get more work out of them that way.

Lally: Yeah. Did you ever participate in any of the organized recreation programs, like the sports or...

Meredith: No, I never did enjoy that. I had a farm to run and when I had time off, I come to the farm. And I [not clear] education [not clear] they wanted me to teach kids in the schoolroom where they...in the carpentry room and I wouldn't do it. There was so many kids that I was afraid they'd cut their hands off with that [not clear] and he said, "Will you keep them tools sharpened?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll do that." [not clear] bunch of kids cut their hands off with high-powered saw or planer. Joe Kulesza took his fingers off [not clear] cut... [laughing]

Lally: Did any of your boys ever play pranks on each other?

Meredith: Yeah, they was all the time playing pranks on one another.

Lally: Do you remember anything they used to do?

Meredith: Oh, they'd short-sheet one another. Do you know what that is? And they'd cut up shaving branches and put it in the bed. And they'd caulk the bed [not clear] [laughing] They were all the time trying to [not clear].

Lally: They...somebody was telling me about making some of the new boys guard a flagpole with a broom. [laughter]

Meredith: I never seen any of that. Course, some of them were older and I wasn't there.

Lally: Where was Camp 4 situated again? On the fork of the...

Meredith: You know where the ranger is at?

Lally: Uh-huh.

Meredith: On this side of the river?

Lally: I think so.

Meredith: [not clear] Come straight on out that road just a piece out there. And sometimes you can come on through and come out on the road where [not clear] and part of the time [not clear]. Last time I was in [not clear], like to never got turned around. Little narrow road...you can't hardly tell it...it's grewed up...great big trees. Only thing I found that I knowed when I looked back there was the old...corner of an old chlorinator that [not clear] in cement [not clear] didn't tear it up.

Lally: I'm going to have to get somebody to show me where these things are.

Meredith: It was way down here on the hillside, you see, and the barracks...I believe we had four...[not clear] and the commanding officer was down here and they had...I don't know what

they called it...where they had food...

Lally: Mess hall?

Meredith: No.

Lally: Commissary or whatever.

Meredith: Yeah, commissary where they had things to sell the boys. And the bathroom was setting right along there and the land was [not clear] home down here. And the kitchen [not clear] where we eat was in here.

Lally: Uh-huh.

Meredith: [not clear] what they call the ECW office.

Lally: What does that stand for?

Meredith: I doubt if I know...where they had the tools and where Joe Kulesza worked. And we checked the tools [not clear]. And right back here where the blacksmith shop was at. And the sergeant would come up and follow us out there and we'd line up to it before breakfast. And then we'd go in and get breakfast and I usually went on out to the blacksmith shop or the ECW office or got in my truck and drive a route, whatever I had to do. And he'd line the boys up and bring them out there and put them on trucks...I believe they had four general foreman: Pat Fisher and Dan ____; fellow by the name of Cates. Well, mine quit...and Claude Priddy acted foreman [not clear]. I sharpened tools in the blacksmith shop, drill bits; and I sharpened 14 cross-cut saws one time. There was...the teeth were about like my thumb.

Lally: Hmm.

Meredith: And the superintendent [not clear], and I told him "No." I didn't have anything to show him. I said, "Soon as we..." You know what a cross-cut saw is? It's got two teeth and what's called a 'dragger' that drags the dust out. And it's six foot long. I said, "You looking to make some teeth?" He said, "Can you make some teeth?" I said, "Yeah, you get me the [not clear]" And I went down between this tooth and the dragger wrench and [not clear] down between the tooth an inch [not clear] and down the same length and took a gauge and cut this here off...[not clear]...where the tooth could cut and the dragger pick up the dust. And he...the superintendent come in the evening the first day and said, "How many you got?" I said, "When I get this one, I'll have one." He said, "One!" And it took me 14 days [not clear]. When we went

down and met the man from Number 2 camp, he wanted to know where that saw come from. Said it wasn't a CC saw. I said, "Yes, it is and I've got 13 more up there just like it." That saw was *good*. [not clear]

Lally: I know you said that you and the other camps didn't interact too much at work, but do you know if there was much interaction among the different camps at other times?

Meredith: Not too much. They played ball sometimes and did a few things together. I don't know. Me and them didn't have...me and the bosses had to sometimes. We had to...but that's the only time...maybe all we'd do was...come help me do something and I went to help them but it wasn't very often. I usually stayed on my...now, I went in there [not clear] and worked and I ...all the time I was across the river, I was [not clear] around the hotel and, uh, around the chlorinator, at the oil house, and the superintendent's home and [not clear] log cabin. I was in there [not clear]; I still don't own it.

Lally: I know that there was an all-black camp, Camp No. 1. Do you have any idea about how the whites felt about the presence of blacks in the camp nearby?

Meredith: Well, they didn't think too much of them back in that day. Not near as much as they do now.

Lally: Was there any...?

Meredith: I don't know as they had any trouble or any tension between them, but a colored man back in the '40s wasn't thought too much of. And as far as them having any trouble, I don't know nothing about it. [not clear] I did have an uncle was general foreman in the colored camp and he got along with them all right but...

Lally: How did the local residents...you are also a local resident around the park...how did they feel about the, the development of the park and the CCC being in the area?

Meredith: Well, after it stayed in here a while, they liked it. But when it first come in here, they didn't like it. They got to helping the people out a whole lot. If a fire was on my place, they'd come over here and put it out. And, then, uh, I was a leader there. I went to a lot of cemeteries and dug graves...took a bunch of men and dig them graves. And, see, that helped them a whole lot. And we had awful good bosses. We had...project superintendent was a fine man, Homer Salisbury and, uh, the superintendent of the park was a fine man. He lives out...Hoskins. And he

come over there and he found out I was going to leave and offered me a house to live in if I'd stay...put wood in the yard for two dollars and a half a month and I said, "I can't stay here." "Well," he said, "it's politics. Ain't a thing in the world I can do about it." He said, "I hate to see you go." I went over to Two Turns, got a little bit of job and stayed over there 29 years.

Lally: Were there any specific instances of tension between the local residents and, you know, the park service or the CCC at the time?

Meredith: [cough] Not too much. The rangers got into it with a few on account of hunting and sand digging and one thing and another. And maybe when they first come in here...I don't know, now...but maybe a little moonshine. There was lots of moonshine in here at that time. People...times was so hard, they just couldn't hardly make a living and they made it any way they could do it. And the park finally run them off; they just backed off and quit.

Lally: Yeah, I had some...another man tell me about going to find a moonshiner. [laughing]

Meredith: But Hoskins, he made friends with the people and I think maybe the rangers pulled a gun...that had a whole lot to do. We had some awful nice young fellas in here though. One man shot a ranger [not clear].

Lally: I think I heard about that. [laughter--Meredith] Was that Vernon Wells or something?

Meredith: Uh, I don't know. If it was, I [not clear] We had some awful good rangers. Me and Wells couldn't get along. I don't know why [not clear] and the superintendent told me to cuss him out and I didn't do it. I just told him if he didn't like what I was doing, I told him to go see the superintendent. He's the one told me what to do.

Lally: So there was a pretty good relationship with the CCC in the area?

Meredith: Yeah, after they's in here a while. They got, I'd say, pretty good relations.

Lally: Did a lot of guys date local girls?

Meredith: Yeah. I think a lot of the girls [not clear]. [laughter]

Lally: Maybe that's how those fires...

Meredith: They'd go back down on these roads just as far as they could get, you know? Well, it wouldn't be but a few minutes and here'd come a truckload of [not clear] about sending them out. When they first come over here, before I went over there. And there wasn't nothing [not clear]. They want to see an old CC boy, let them see it. I imagine there's lots of fires put out

[not clear], and there's quite a few of the girls around the country that married the boys.

Lally: Yeah, I've heard that...Joe Kulesza, didn't he marry one of the girls?

Meredith: Yeah, and he come from Indiana, Joe did. A boy from over Tompkinsville married one of my cousins and one from Glasgow married one of them. There's quite a few of the boys...

Lally: I'm going to turn the tape over real fast.

[End of Side 1]

Lally: This is the second side of the tape of my interview with Mr. Smith Meredith. How successful do you think the CCC was in relieving the effects of the Depression?

Meredith: Well, it was [not clear]. One boy worked for me, he was an orphan...what I mean, didn't have no daddy. It was awful effective and the boys, on my side now, from superintendent, uh, Salisbury...they worked. They worked hard and they was good workers and, uh, it was awful hard on a lot of people.

Lally: Did a lot of...did many of the CCC men go to work at the park after...after they ended their time?

Meredith: No, not very many. Just a few of them went to work...see, Joe went to work. He went off to another park then he come back here as superintendent. And Paul Coletta, he was a school teacher and he went to work as a guide over there and then he got to be ranger. And there's a few of them...a few firemen stayed on [not clear] and Mammoth Cave. I had a brother-in-law was a soldier, he got on as fireman. He died while he was working on that.

Lally: How do you think the development of the park helped the economy of the area? Did it help it or change it a lot?

Meredith: Yeah, it changed it a lot and a lot of people liked it but, personally, I didn't [not clear]. I liked what they done in a way but it took an awful lot of the land and took all the river land up and down [not clear]. This dam is left too little...farms on the...[not clear] and for a long time they didn't even give no tax credit, but I think they're getting a little tax now. I'm not sure but I think there's a little tax. [not clear]

Lally: So now I guess it's mostly tourism that's the big...?

Meredith: Yeah, they bring in quite a bit. This dam down here brings in a whole lot.

Lally: Did most of the people who were displaced by the park kind of figure they'd go

somewhere else in Edmonson County and farm or did they just try...?

Meredith: No, they scattered all over the place. Some of them left the state. And I had an uncle [not clear], he went down to Bowling Green and a lot of them went to Indiana and some of them went to Illinois and they just...they's a lot of them stayed. Of course, they didn't bother [not clear]. And dad and mom left and they stayed there till they died. They did run my grandma out over there in [not clear]. And then two of the uncles out from over there.

Lally: What do you think was the greatest contribution that the CCC made for the country?

Meredith: Well, at the time being, outside of helping people when they want it, building roads. And, uh, building that new road over there where the new [not clear] is at. Now there's times in here that the only way in the world we can get out is go to Munfordville. The old ferry [not clear], I guess you've been down to it, it wasn't safe [not clear]. ...didn't have too good a boat, didn't have too big a boat, and we were forced out [not clear] and that's the only way we got out. And that was a great help to us in case of emergency.

Lally: Do you think the CCC helped training the boys for the military?

Meredith: Nah, I don't think...aw, it helped in some sense. Them young kids left home and come over there and they was under a sergeant and under some of the rules but I don't think it helped them too much as being a soldier. But it did help them...being away from home. And some of them there was away from home and they got used to that and, course, as far as military training, they didn't get but a very little of it. Calisthenics is about all they got. And...

Lally: What do you think were the biggest problems with the CCC, or were there any?

Meredith: Well, I don't think we had too much trouble with them after...got kinda used to them. But they's...nine tenths of the people in here's rooted up here in these backwoods and a whole lot of them couldn't read and write and it was something new forced on them. And after they kinda got used to them and seen the boys weren't going to bother them and they helped them out a whole lot, why, there wasn't too much trouble with them.

Lally: Were there any problems within the CCC itself, like in...?

Meredith: Oh, they'd fight ever once in a while...the boys would. They'd have a fight. None of them never...well, the one [not clear].

Lally: Did many of the boys desert? Do you know of any...?

Meredith: Not very many. Most of the ones that deserted was young and come in and wasn't but a few days they were gone.

Lally: What did you do after you left?

Meredith: After I left there? I went to Two Turns.

Lally: Two Turns. And you worked?

Meredith: I lacked...[not clear] been there 29 years. And I went to work the 12th day of December and they, uh, discharged me the 20th. The reason I know that date so well, that's my daughter's birthday; she was two years old.

Lally: Did you work with the stone and concrete still?

Meredith: No, I was a mandrel maker.

Lally: A metalmaker?

Meredith: A *mandrel* maker..

Lally: Man...Oh.

Meredith: I believe I got one here.

Lally: Yeah, I'd love to see one. [long pause] A mandrel...

Meredith: I went in with the inspector [not clear].

Lally: What is this used for? Where do you...?

Meredith: We put that on a rod, weld it to a rod about 20 feet long and [not clear] red hot and put pressure under it and it just come up...come off in one and a half...they call that a one and a half radius and, uh, come off 90 degrees and, time of the war, some come off at 180. And we'd take two of them and weld them together and make tires to go on their wagons when they couldn't get no tires.

Lally: Oh, okay.

Meredith: And I stayed there so long, the biggest one we had was 42 inches across here.

Lally: Wow.

Meredith: And the least we had was 250,000th, about the size of that pencil. And I was making the least one, I was the oldest man...and this here one was 19511, that was a number. And 139 was what we had and [not clear] 'stl for steel light and that's just as hard [not clear]. We had a piece of metal we called a template. We had to grind that to fit that. We had one on the back

side, we had to grind that [thumping sound]. We had one on each side and we had to do that to keep from having the sides curved in. And we had one ring [not clear] and we had three rings come up here and make [not clear]. And I was only allowed 10,000 tolerance [not clear] and that's awful little. Had to go down to the end of the wheel and polish it down with sand...sandpaper.

Lally: And you did that for 29 years?

Meredith: Just lacks a few months being 29 years. It was the inspector's first year.

Lally: And you...did you go into World War II or...?

Meredith: No. They turned me down.

Lally: Turned you down.

Meredith: Now, when I was over there at the camp, they got us up and registered and I was one of the first ones. And they called 15 and I was one of the 15. [laughing] And I was married and had one kid and they just kept putting me off and putting me off. And they finally called me and told me to come in and the man that owned this company was head of the deferment board. And I went and told my, the other foreman, I said, "I got to go home." He said, "No." Said, "The old man will get you out of it." Said, "He needs you." I said, "No. They've jerked me around all their going to." I said, "They're going to take me [not clear]." "Well," he said, "You don't have to go home." Said, "They'll get you transferred up here." I said, "No, I'm going home and maybe I'll go with some of the boys. [not clear]." And I come on home anyhow, come Cave City and walked to Mammoth Cave and come in with the mail carrier and wasn't down there a day before I was supposed to. And told the doctor what was going on and he said, "Get your blood test, and I'll give you an examination a day ahead." Well, it was going pretty well, I reckon. He said, "Is there anything the matter with you?" I said, "No, I don't reckon." I said, "What if there are and I don't tell you?" He cussed a big oath and said, "You better tell it if you know it." And I said, "Uh, the x-ray man up on the Hayburn Building said I had neuliosis." He said, "That's as far as you're going." He kicked me out and I never did hear from him anymore.

Lally: So you retired in '69 or '70 was it?

Meredith: I don't know when...I've been back down here about 18 years. I think 18 years... '87. That'd be about '70 then wouldn't it?

Lally: Yeah. Is there anything else you want to tell me about the CCC?

Meredith: No. [laughing] I done talked too much now.

Lally: No, you did just wonderful. Thank you for your time. I really appreciate it.

[End of Interview]