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Interview with James Dennison (FA 81)

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The following is an unrehearsed interview with Mr. Dennison on his work with the CCC at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. The interview was conducted by Kelly Lalley on June 27, 1987.

[NOTE: Because the first part of the tape was cut off, Mr. Dennison's first name and the site of the interview have been lost.]

Lalley: When were you born, Mr. Dennison?

Dennison: January [not clear], '21

Lalley: And where were you born?

Dennison: Hart County. Cave City route.

Lalley: Close to Munfordville or...?

Dennison: Back over...right over from...little place called North Haven.

Lalley: How many people were in your family?

Dennison: Uh, about six. Two brothers and four sisters.

Lalley: And where did you fit in?

Dennison: Well, I guess I was about...well, there's two more. One more...two more younger than I am. I would be about the fourth one, I guess, wouldn't I?

Lalley: And what was your family doing? Were you farmers or...?

Dennison: Well, it was until my daddy died but, uh, after he died, we just worked at just anything we could. [Ringing of windchimes in background throughout the interview.]

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

Dennison: They was pretty rough. It was really rough. You couldn't find nothing to do. We was all young, and it was pretty hard on us at times.

Lalley: How did you hear about the CCC?

Dennison: Well, I lived right over by...when they first come in [not clear]. I was just small but I was [not clear] where it was located. And I'd hear all about it from then on.

Lalley: How were people selected for the CCC in your area?

Dennison: Well, just anybody that, uh, didn't have a job that wanted to join could.

Lalley: Did you know of anybody who wasn't able to...wasn't able to...[sound of car going by] wasn't selected to be in the CCC?

Dennison: Well, I only know of one and that was because he didn't pass his physical examination is the only one that I ever knowed was turned down.

Lalley: When did you go into the CCC?

Dennison: Uh, along in...about the 15th of September in '41.

Lalley: And how old were you?

Dennison: I was 19.

Lalley: And how long did you stay in the CCC all together?

Dennison: Around nine months. I stayed until June in '42, till they broke up.

Lalley: Which camp were you in when you were at Mammoth Cave?

Dennison: No. 2, Company 543.

Lalley: Describe how you felt when you left home for the CCC.

Dennison: Well, I'd...always thought about I'd like to join it. Course I was right here close where I could come home on the weekend. I guess leaving home didn't bother me.

Lalley: You didn't really get homesick then?

Dennison: Nah, uh-uh. [cleared throat]

Lalley: Did they send you anywhere for training before you started your actual work?

Dennison: Nah, uh-uh. We just stayed around camp a few days, taking our shots and all, and then they put us right out on the detail to work.

Lalley: Do you remember your very first day in camp?

Dennison: Yeah, I remember the first day real well when I joined.

Lalley: Can you describe it to me?

Dennison: Well, I just don't know much to say about it other than we just laid around the first day. So the doctor showed up and give us our physical examinations, and then we was issued our clothes and assigned to our barracks. For a few days, we just cleaned up around camp until we got all of our shots and things taken, and they sent us out on work detail.

Lalley: I know that you started out with \$30 a month, or a dollar a day, and that about 25 of that went to your family. How did you spend your extra money?

Dennison: Well, most...I smoked and most times I used it up for smoking and soft drinks and things around the canteen. Films to make pictures with... 'bout what all I used it for.

Lalley: What work detail were you assigned to? What did you do?

Dennison: I was assigned to a tree-trimming outfit there at Mammoth Cave; John [not clear] was foreman. And we cut dead timber out of the...around the...for wood that the CCs burned. Then we trimmed the dead limbs out of the trees and just kept all the dead timber cleaned out.

Lalley: Did you do this park-wide or did you just do this in the area of Camp No. 2?

Dennison: [not clear] we went all through the park cleaning it out, cutting the dead timber down and...

Lalley: Did you have a certain way that you climbed the trees to get up there?

Dennison: Well, I really didn't do much tree climbing. A lot of them had ropes and things. They'd just swing from one tree to the other cutting the dead branches out. But mostly I was over cross-cut saw, helping saw the stuff up.

Lalley: Down at the bottom?

Dennison: Uh-huh.

Lalley: And then it was all carted back to the camp?

Dennison: Yeah, and some of it was used in the picnic areas.

Lalley: Did you ever...did you have any other jobs that you did?

Dennison: Well, then, finally got to working in the kitchen before I left there. Washing pots and pans. That was my job.

Lalley: Well, could you describe a typical day's work or typical day...how you...when you woke up and what you did throughout the day?

Dennison: Well, when we woke up, the first thing we had to make our beds up and get everything in order, and then we'd have our breakfast and police up the grounds, and then we'd go out to work. And, uh, we done a good day's work, too.

Lalley: Did you come back for lunch or did you eat out there?

Dennison: No, well, when I was out here at No. 2, we'd come back. We was close. A lot of them now that was maybe further away, didn't. But my bunch would usually come back for dinner for we was around close at the time.

Lalley: How much free time did you have?

Dennison: Huh?

Lalley: How much free time did you have?

Dennison: Free time? Well, you had right smart...all the weekends and then when you'd get off every evening after supper, you could do [not clear] around till bedtime and then...had plenty of free time.

Lalley: What time was bedtime?

Dennison: Huh?

Lalley: What time was bedtime?

Dennison: Uh, about ten o'clock.

Lalley: Did you ever participate in any...any of the recreational programs?

Dennison: Uh, no, I didn't.

Lalley: What about the education programs? Did you ever get into any of those?

Dennison: No, but I'd taken the carpenter schooling at No. 2, and I had classes to take at carpenter school.

Lalley: Did you learn a lot?

Dennison: Yeah, I learned a right smart. I been working carpenter work the rest of my life.

Lalley: That was a good start for you then.

Dennison: Yeah.

Lalley: Is that where you first got into that?

Dennison: Yeah, that's when I first got interested in it.

Lalley: Uh, later on in the CCC, did you get a chance to use your carpenter skills?

Dennison: No, I never did in the CCs. It's like I said...just a couple of months and I left there.

Went to Idaho. [low voice of unidentified person in background]

Lalley: In Idaho did you use your...?

Dennison: Well, I...we helped build a big warehouse and...of course, we had contractors over us. We was just helping them.

Lalley: Did any of the CCC boys play pranks on each other?

Dennison: Oh, yeah. That was done a lot of times.

Lalley: Do you remember any of them?

Dennison: Yeah, I remember several of them. I remember in particular one time I come in at night and I couldn't find the bed; and the next morning I found it hanging up in the ceiling.

[laughter]

Lalley: Where'd you sleep?

Dennison: I piled up in a little cot with another boy. [laughter-Lalley]

Lalley: Do you remember any others?

Dennison: Well, I...remember a lot of them...most that were pulled on me. But a lot of [not clear] they would hot-foot them or...

Lalley: Hot?

Dennison: Yeah.

Lalley: How...?

Dennison: [not clear] them asleep and put shoe polish on their shoes and set it afire. [laughter-Lalley]. There was all kinds of pranks. I can tell you one good one that a boy up here in town pulled. It was there in Idaho. We was quarantined for mumps...we wasn't allowed to go to town and, uh, so, our water pump had broke down...had to haul water out of town in a big tank and this tank...when they'd drain it, it lacked about two foot of all...pumping all the water out of the tank and they'd have to go back and get another load. So a bunch of us wanted to go to town, and we slipped in that tank, pulled our shoes off and rolled our britches legs up, and slipped out of camp in that tank. And, so, uh, when we come back that night, why this, uh, guy stopped to pick us all up and it was the superintendent. So, we, uh...one boy was drinking right smart so we put him in the front seat and we all got in the back. When we got to camp, why we jumped out and run. Didn't want the superintendent to know who we was. And so he asked this boy what his name was and he told him, "Abe Brown," who was another boy. And, so, we [not clear] Abe Brown had to pull K.P. [laughter] fooled everybody.

Lalley: Were there...was there any interaction among the different CCC camps at Mammoth Cave?

Dennison: Any what?

Lalley: Interaction among the different CCC camps? Like 2 and 3 or...?

Dennison: I really don't know. I just didn't know much about the others since I was there such a short time.

Lalley: Was the recreational hall built while you were there?

Dennison: Uh...

Lalley: The Whoopee House, they called it. [laughing]

Dennison: No, that was built before that. I remember going there before when I was small, before I even went to the CCs. I remember going to the Whoopee House.

Lalley: Did, uh, did the different camps come in together or did you have your own night for each camp?

Dennison: Well, we would, uh...really I couldn't tell you whether at that time for...see, I lived over there with No. 1 and a bunch of boys that would, uh, would ask us to come over there, and I don't know whether there was other CC boys there other than that No. 1 or not. But that was for...it was a colored camp but I remember going there. I imagine all of them used it.

Lalley: How did the white people feel about the presence of the black...a black camp nearby?

Dennison: Well, I just...none of them I ever heard had anything agin them. Course we all hated to see them tear their camp up and bring them over there; but, just being bitter about it or anything, I never heard nobody...seen nobody that even thought about it that way.

Lalley: So they broke up Camp No. 2 and brought the black camp over?

Dennison: Uh-huh.

Lalley: When did this happen?

Dennison: That happened in '41.

Lalley: Toward the end?

Dennison: Yeah. Well, it was in '42 when it broke up. That happened about November...sometime in November of '41. They just broke No. 2 up and brought the colored over there to chip in at different places. That's when I was sent to Idaho.

Lalley: So, do you remember any instances of racial tension at all?

Dennison: No, sure don't.

Lalley: How did the local residents feel about the CCC being in the area?

Dennison: Well, as far as I know they all, uh, thought it was a nice thing to have them. I never heard nothing...nobody ever [not clear] as far as me now. They could have, but I never did hear them.

Lalley: Well, I've heard, at least in the very beginning, that some of the residents were upset about losing their homes because of the park...

Dennison: Oh, well, the park...

Lalley: Not the boys.

Dennison: Not the boys but the park. A lot of them didn't like to have to pull up and move out

and leave their home, but as far as the boys...a lot of the people made their living around here washing for them CC boys.

Lalley: Washing clothes?

Dennison: Washing clothes for them. My mother washed clothes for them. As far as that, they got along just fine. I never heard nothing [not clear].

Lalley: To what extent did the men date local girls? Did a lot of them?

Dennison: Well, there were several of them, but out in Idaho there wasn't very many. But back here I know several of them that married girls they met in the CCs. There was a lot of that.

Lalley: Were there many dances or anything? Where the girls were brought in?

Dennison: I never did go to any here. I just couldn't tell you. There probably was but I didn't never go to any. It's like I said, I was just out there two months.

Lalley: How was it decided that you would go to Idaho?

Dennison: Huh?

Lalley: How was it decided that you would go to Idaho?

Dennison: Well, they just, uh...when they broke up, they asked for volunteers to go west. We didn't know where we was going till we left Fort Benjamin Harrison [not clear]. Didn't know which part of the west we was going to.

Lalley: What was the camp's name that you were at at Idaho?

Dennison: Uh, it was at Shoshone. It was Camp Wood River...Shoshone, Idaho.

Lalley: And what year did you go to Shoshone, Idaho?

Dennison: I went in '41.

Lalley: And how long were you there again?

Dennison: Till...I went in November of '41 and was there till June of '42 when they broke up. I believe it was the 22nd day of June.

Lalley: What kind of work did you do in Idaho, as compared to what you did at Mammoth Cave?

Dennison: Well, we built...we built fences and we, uh, built a big warehouse. Some of us cleaned canals and first one thing and then another. We built fences to keep the snow from blowing in on the roads.

Lalley: Was it a park or was it just...?

Dennison: No, just out on the open plains.

Lalley: How successful do you think the CCC was in relieving the effects of the Depression?

Dennison: I think it played a big part in it. There was...in all, I think, there was about...around three million boys served in it. That's been a lot of jobs and I think it had a whole lot to do with it.

Lalley: Did it really help your family?

Dennison: It sure did. Me and my brother both went and then that was \$50 a month sent home to start with, and then they changed it and give us more of it and sent less home. It helped a lot.

Lalley: When did they change the way they did the salaries?

Dennison: Well, let's see. I just couldn't tell you just when but it was [not clear -- sound of car passing by] after I went in, they started putting...sending \$10 home and giving you eight and putting twelve in the bank for you.

Lalley: Hmm.

Dennison: So when you got out you got a little nest egg in the bank.

Lalley: That's the first time I've heard that.

Dennison: Yeah.

Lalley: What about the local area around the cave and the park...what...how successful was it in relieving the Depression...changing the economy around here?

Dennison: Well, it helped a whole lot. There was a lot of men given jobs here...just local men that had wives and kids that helped them out. There was several working in each county.

Lalley: Did the economy change much from say farming to tourism yet or was that a little bit later down the line or...?

Dennison: Well, as far as I can remember, there's been a lot of tourist business around. But, uh, of course, I don't know that the CCCs changed that, but, uh, there's always had a lot of tourist business around here.

Lalley: Were there any problems that you could see with the CCC either, you know, right where you were or on the big scale as a program?

Dennison: No, I never did see any problems with it myself. I guess everybody that I ever seen thought it was a good thing.

Lalley: What do you consider to be the greatest contribution of the CCC? Just employment or...?

Dennison: I guess it was. Just taking boys that couldn't get jobs and give them a place to [not clear]. That was a big part of it.

Lalley: Do you think it made much of a difference for the military when World War II started?

Dennison: Oh, yeah. I think it helped a whole lot. A lot of these boys that had to go to the services, they done...this helped prepare them. They was used to staying away from home and helped in ways like that. It helped them a lot, I think. Of course, I didn't go to the service. I read in this little journal that I get about the CCs a lot of guys went on to the service telling how it helped prepare them for the service.

Lalley: What did you do when you got out of the CCC?

Dennison: Well, I come back here and went to work at just first one thing and then another. Mostly I went to work in a log business right after I come back, and so then I got to doing carpenter work. Go to one job right after...then another one. Just anything I could get. It finally picked up where you could get work just about any time you wanted it.

Lalley: And you stayed in the carpentry business?

Dennison: Yeah. I been working the carpentry business [not clear] ever since.

Lalley: So you think learning to be a carpenter in the...in the CCC [sound of phone ringing] education program made a big difference for you?

Dennison: I think it helped a whole lot. Learned right smart in it.

Lalley: Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the CCC?

Dennison: Well, I just really don't know much more...much more to tell you. I know I really enjoyed it, and I...I think it'd be a good thing again today.

Lalley: You think it might be nice to start it up again?

Dennison: Yes, I think it would, uh...if the government could just see a way of doing it. I think it would be nice. It helps the community...they set a lot of trees, fought fires and a lot of things. They could train them, especially out in these western states, they could train them to fight fires and stuff like that.

Lalley: Hmmm. Well, I don't have any more questions.

Dennison: [chuckle] Well, I just, uh, much that I...more that I knowed about it. I really enjoyed

it. I thought enough of it I went back out to the old campsite last summer, seen the buildings that we built, seen the old campsite. I really enjoyed the CCs myself.

Lalley: Do you still keep in touch with many of the people that you were in the CCC with?

Dennison: Yeah, as many as I can. That's why I joined this alumni. I went last year and run into one I was over here at No. 2 with, one I was in Idaho with. Went over there a couple of weeks ago and seen one of them I was with in Idaho. I really enjoyed hearing from him.

Lalley: I really appreciate your taking the time to talk with me.

Dennison: I'm glad to help you all I can.

Lalley: I'll go ahead and stop the tape.

[End of Interview]