

CCC Interview with Tom Larson

February 12, 2002

Fort Dodge, Iowa

Interviewer: Larry Wilson

Tom Larson's comments are in bold type.

Where was your home town?

Ft. Dodge, Iowa

How old were you when you enrolled?

Sixteen years old (but I said I was 17 as that was the minimum age for enrollment) when enrolled for the first time; was later discharged when it was discovered I was under the minimum age. I re-enrolled when I was 18.

What did you do before going to the CCC Camp?

Just odd jobs in the area.

Why did you enroll in the CCC program?

To help out my parents. Dad worked 3 days/week. There were eight kids in the family.

What CCC camps were you assigned to?

#3726 Clarion. The Clarion camp was built in 1935.

Were you ever transferred?

No.

When did you work at the Camp?

4/20/37 – 5/13/37 then 7/8/39 – 6/25/40

Tell me about your first days at the camp, clothing, equipment, toiletries issued, etc.

Issued clothes, got a physical and dental exam, work clothes and dress clothes. Military/Army style clothes. All the required toiletries.

What personal items did you have when you arrived?

Just the clothes I was wearing and a razor.

What were you not allowed to keep?

I was not allowed to keep my straight razor after being cut while shaving when bumped by another man. I was issued a safety razor.

How were you billeted (assigned lodging)?

Just assigned to a barracks (military style).

Describe the type of shelter you slept in?

We slept in Army style barracks holding 20 men each. Each barrack was heated by a pot-belly coal burning stove. One man was assigned to stay awake each night to keep stove burning; he wasn't required to work the next day.

Who supplied your bedding?

The federal government.

Who were your bunkmates?

Bud Graves, Amery Phillips (Moved to California).

Tell me about the food in the mess hall.

Very good compared to what I was used to. Meals consisted of beef, pork, veal, fruit, cereal, juice, stew, veggies. Camp was very “military” like in the organization. Everything had to be clean. Shoes had to be cleaned every night, before you went to the mess hall.

Who did the cooking?

Cooks and the helpers, the guys that were assigned by the CCC. Our lunches were sent out in the field and we received coffee and sandwiches. The meals were great. When I entered the CCCs I weighed 135 pounds and when I left I weighed 170 pounds.

How were your holiday meals?

For Thanksgiving we had turkey and ham. Special food on special days.

When was payday?

End of the month.

How much were you paid?

Pay was \$30.00 per month; allowed to keep \$5.00 and remaining \$25.00 was sent home to family.

How did you spend your pay?

Went to Clarion to see the movie “Gone With The Wind” when it came out; bought an occasional hamburger and coke; bought pictures of camp, and cigarettes.

When were your days off, and how did you spend them?

Weekends were the days off. Sometimes I would take a train from Clarion to Ft. Dodge, but mostly stayed in camp. You needed to get a pass to leave the camp on the weekend.

How was the Sabbath observed in camp?

I was usually up at 5:30 during the workdays. You could sleep in on the weekends- up at 6:30 a.m. – eat at 7:30 a.m. We had a chaplain on base. You could go to church in town.

Tell me about the sports activities in the camp.

Softball (kittenball back then), and we had a recreation hall. Football, volleyball, and boxing. Recreation hall to play pool and many indoor activities.

What part did you take in them?

I played softball. Also did some boxing, trained for the Golden Gloves Championship and was selected to represent the camp at the regional meet in Ft. Dodge. I won the first two matches but lost the third to Howard Brooks, a boy that I had grown up with in Otho. Howard was four years older and a more experienced boxer. Howard and I practiced together in an old shed when we were younger. Howard advanced to the state tournament where he won the state title but lost to an Indian fellow from South Dakota.

Tell me about any personal conflicts you had, and how you dealt with them?

None. Some did though, usually from guys in town drinking.

What types of discipline were used to punish rule breakers?

Officers took care of any problems that would arise. K.P. duty- you would have to clean out the grease pit. Demerits-punishment on a point system. You wouldn't be allowed to get a pass to leave the camp.

I understand there were some educational/trade opportunities available. Did you take advantage of any of these?

Not personally. Some worked in heavy equipment operation and cooking. I did receive some training in NYA, National Youth Administration, in Milford after leaving the CCC.

Who were your teachers in the CCCs?

Civilians.

Where were classes held?

At camp.

What benefits did you get out of these classes at camp or after leaving camp?

I did not participate.

What were some of the main projects your camp was involved in?

Worked on drainage tile installation, and cleaning of drainage ditches on farms. When cleaning the drainage ditches, the men would take the fence down, remove trees and stumps, then the ditch was cleared with a drag line. The dirt that was removed and put on the bank was leveled off with a cat and a grader and the fences were put back in place.

What were some of your duties?

My primary job was working with the journeyman tiler in the bottom of the ditch where 36" tile pipe was being placed. The journeyman told me what to do. It was a labor intensive job; had to remove the dirt and shape the earth to receive the tile. The ditch was about seven feet deep.

What type of skills did you receive?

Forming earth to receive laid tile. I had the most labor intensive job; I was in the ditches laying the tile. The tile was buried about 7 feet down.

Who trained you?

The foreman monitored our performance.

Who were your leaders?

Jens Kjar. He was in his late 50's and was the official tiler for the county; He died in 1940 and is buried in Roland, Iowa.

How did you get along with them?

Fine.

How did you get your work assignments each day?

From the foreman.

What type of equipment did you use? How was it issued to you?

Our equipment was issued from a truck. I usually used a tile spade, spades, and shovels. You had to clean the tools everyday and place them on the truck before heading back to town.

Who were some of your fellow workers, and how did you get along with them?

Bud Graves, Avery Phillips. I got along with both of them very well.

What contact, if any, have you had with any of your fellow CCC workers?

Bud Graves only.

How did the city kids and the country kids get along at camp?

Usually okay. Some locals in town did resent the CCC guys a little bit.

Were there any minority groups, i.e. African Americans, Hispanic, Native American, or others, working at the camp?

No.

How were they treated by their superiors?

N/A

How were they treated by their fellow workers?

N/A

Tell me about the specific skills you learned in camp.

I basically just got good at laying tile.

How did these skills benefit you after leaving the camp?

When I joined the Air Force in WW2 they said you could tell the guys who were in the CCCs by the discipline they had.

Were there any injuries at work?

Only work injuries were some minor cuts and bruises. Our crew received an award for 100 days without injuries.

How were these injuries taken care of?

By the doctors on bases.

Were you ever injured?

I fell and broke a bone in my right hand during my first enrollment.

That's when the doctor learned I was underage to be in the CCC's and was discharged.

What diseases occurred in camp, and how were these treated?

None.

Tell me about any insect & rodent problems?

There were none.

What work, if any, did you do outside the camp or in the community during your CCC days?

None.

Were you paid?

N/A

What contacts did you have with the outside community?

None, not much at all.

What fellowship type organizations, i.e., Masonic, Elks, Odd Fellows, did you or any of the camp workers attend at camp, or in the community?

Didn't attend any community organization activities, but a newspaper article on January 4, 1940 indicates that a total of \$393.00 was donated to the local Red Cross Drive by Clarion residents, and donations were received from 102 boys at the CCC camp.

Would you tell me about any contacts you had with females during your stay at the camp?

None.

Were there any problems with other young men in the local community?

Yes, there was some local resentment, especially from non CCC boys.

How do you think the members of the CCC camp were felt about by the local community?

The locals in Clarion didn't care much for the boys in the camp because of their economic status.

What is your most memorable experience at the CCC camp?

Nothing too special.

What was your oddest experience at the camp?

During my first enrollment, the injury to my hand which got me kicked out of the camp for being too young. During my second enrollment, due to a blizzard the train carrying coal could not get to Clarion and the camp ran out of coal to heat the barracks. All of the boys were taken to the courthouse where we slept on the floor. When the train got through the CCC boys unloaded the coal and returned to their barracks.

What do you think was your biggest accomplishment at the camp?

Making some money for the family.

How do you think your life was changed, by enrolling in the CCCs?

Learned discipline and hard work.

What did you do after leaving the CCCs?

Went to the NYA (National Youth Administration) camp in Milford for machinist training. Took a test in Ft. Dodge at the high school; was hired and went to Burbank, California where I worked as an aircraft assembler and did some extra work in the movies. I entered the Merchant Marines in 1942, then was drafted into the Air Force when I returned home to Iowa to visit the family. Gene Autrey was in my barracks while training in Texas. I was then shipped overseas to England where I helped repair B-17's at the Air Depot in Warrington. After D-Day I was sent to Germany where I helped dis-assemble German planes that were sent to the U.S. to be studied after the war. After the war I worked on a tugboat in Seattle, Washington before moving to Alaska where I was a firefighter on the Kodiak Naval Base for 7 ½ years. I returned to Seattle where I owned my own tavern, then worked in the steel industry. I then relocated to California where I worked for the federal government and returned to doing extra work in the movies and television. I returned to Iowa about 14 years ago.

Updated by Larry Wilson August 16, 2005 after receiving comments from Tom Larson.