

CCC INTERVIEW WITH LEO ALTON

Date: March 8, 2002

Location: Pisgah, Iowa

Interviewer: Bob Shierbaum

DNR: Where is your hometown?

Leo: Little Sioux, Iowa. Ten miles west of here.

DNR: How old were you when you joined the CCC?

Leo: I was born in '14, and enrolled in '35. So I was 21.

DNR: What did you do before joining?

Leo: I worked on the farm for my father and my neighbors for fifty cents a day.

DNR: Why did you join the CCC's?

Leo: I needed the work.

DNR: How did you hear about the CCC's?

Leo: I read about it in the paper.

DNR: What camps were you assigned too?

Leo: Council Bluffs. From there to Bedford. From Bedford to Missouri Valley. An engineer helped me get transferred to his camp.

DNR: From Council Bluffs to Bedford was that transfer your choice?

Leo: No. They moved the whole camp. I drove the tractor the whole way.

DNR: Do you recall the dates of the camp attendance?

Leo: No. I was in two years.

DNR: 6 month enlistment than you could re-up?

Leo: Yes.

DNR: What was the first day of camp like?

Leo: We got shots the second day. We got a physical. They issued just clothing. It was military. Shirt, slacks, pants, and no heavy clothes. But later on we got our winter clothes. I went in in the spring of April or May. I had three or four shirts and pants or jeans. We got shoes and socks. They were heavy work shoes. We got a cap. It was like a baseball cap. I got a couple pair of gloves. The first week or ten days I was pushing a wheelbarrow out by the lake. They cut brush and built a dike. We had a fella from the Missouri Valley survey the whole lake. I pulled a fifty foot road chain out of the sand. It was an anchor change The Willow Creek flooded and that's what filled up the lake. It was called Mosquito Creek. They have it under control.

DNR: Did you get a shaving kit?

Leo: Probably did.

DNR: Did you have personal items you could bring to the camp?

Leo: No. My car. Model A Ford was the first one. Then a '48 Chevrolet. I kept it in a garage.

DNR: Were there any items you were not allowed to keep?

Leo: Not that I can think of. You couldn't have a gun.

DNR: How were you lodged?

Leo: We always had barracks. There were thirty guys to a barracks. We had three to four feet between barracks. Aisle in the middle. Bunks near the walls. We had two coal stoves at both ends. They kept us warm.

DNR: Were you supplied with bedding?

Leo: I don't remember. I slept in my underwear. We had sheets and blankets. Our barracks were in the north barracks in Bedford. We had the most coal. We would unload the trucks and they gave us extra coal.

DNR: Do you remember any of your bunkmates?

Leo: No.

DNR: Did the guys in the barracks get along?

Leo: Yes.

DNR: Were there pranks?

Leo: Yes. Short sheeting. We had this one guy who had breasts that would make a 18 year old woman shameful. He wouldn't take a bath. So we hooked up a hose to a heater and we washed him. We called him mama. He wanted to take a bath but they wouldn't leave him alone.

DNR: What was the food like?

Leo: It was nothing extraordinary or fancy. But it was good healthy food. They served plenty of it. In the winter they had just two meals. I missed a couple of meals, and the CO came in and told them to feed me whenever I came in.

DNR: Who did the cooking at the camp?

Leo: The CCC boys who had knowledge of cooking.

DNR: Were there holiday meals?

Leo: I don't remember. I went home on the holidays.

DNR: Do you remember when you were paid?

Leo: At the first of the month. I got \$5 and my folks got \$25. I spent it on cigarettes. There were just twenty cents.

DNR: What were the days off?

Leo: Sunday for the whole camp. Most of the time I didn't have a day off.

DNR: If you had the Sunday off what did you do?

Leo: Girlfriends.

DNR: Was the Sabbath observed?

Leo: You had to go to town for church.

DNR: Do you remember going to church?

Leo: No, but some of them did.

DNR: How did you get into town for church?

Leo: We walked.

DNR: Where was the camp in Council Bluffs in relation to town?

Leo: West on 16th Street then south. Then we go down to the highway to the camp. I had a car in Council Bluffs.

DNR: Were there sport activities?

Leo: They played a little baseball and rough and tumble football.

DNR: Did they have competitions between camps?

Leo: Nope.

DNR: Did they play basketball?

Leo: No.

DNR: Did you take in part of the sport activities?

Leo: A little baseball.

DNR: Did they have boxing or horseshoes?

Leo: Horseshoes but no boxing.

DNR: Did you have any conflicts with other people and how did you deal with it?

Leo: No. We gotta along in pretty good shape.

DNR: How would they resolve an argument?

Leo: No. One side would have to give in.

DNR: Was KP duty a punishment?

Leo: Yes. Everyone did it.

DNR: A lazy person would get punished?

Leo: I don't know.

DNR: If you were AWOL from camp what would happen?

Leo: They would kick them out.

DNR: Were there any vocational or trade opportunities?

Leo: I don't know.

DNR: Who were the teachers?

Leo: Probably unemployed teachers. Our superintendant of our camp was a contractor. Our blacksmith was a blacksmith with his father. They were state employees.

DNR: Do you remember the LEMs?

Leo: We didn't have too many of them.

DNR: What were the main projects the camps were involved in?

Leo: Council Bluffs was reclamation. Bedford was building a lake and park. Missouri Valley, I don't know. Missouri Valley was on the east side of the highway where the tall buildings are. We walked to town. They were working on soldier dikes. I hauled dynamite from Nebraska to Missouri Valley, to open the swamp. It was ditching dynamite. I checked the drag line. I hauled fuel out to them. I don't know their main project. At Bedford, TVA put the dam in and we built the park. We built fire rings and a bathroom. I don't know who built the bathhouse.

DNR: Was the dam there when you got to the Lake of Three Fires?

Leo: No. We built the whole thing. We had a steam engine, that heated the cement for the spillway.

DNR: Were you running the tractor?

Leo: Yes. I unloaded her off the flatcar. It was a gas CAT, number 50. The treads were steel. I dumped dirt on the hill.

DNR: Did you receive training for the CAT?

Leo: No, I had experience on the farm and from a dirt contractor. I did all the maintenance. When I left it was still at Bedford.

DNR: Did you receive any training?

Leo: Drag line operator taught me how to grease the drag line and use it.

DNR: Who were leaders at camp?

Leo: State people. The barracks leader was a corporal or PFC.

DNR: Did you have reveille?

Leo: Yes.

DNR: Did you have a mess hall?

Leo: Yes we just take off and first come first serve.

DNR: At the job it was state people in charge at each camp?

Leo: Yes.

DNR: How did you get along with your leaders?

Leo: Okay.

DNR: How did you get your work assignments?

Leo: They just lined us up and told us what truck to get on. They were the foreman. They were older than us.

DNR: Were they state people?

Leo: Yes.

DNR: How did the foreman get their jobs?

Leo: They were there when we got there.

DNR: Were there some unpopular jobs?

Leo: Working with shovels and making foot bridges were unpopular.

DNR: The bridges had no nails?

Leo: Correct.

DNR: Was there any other equipment you used?

Leo: Grader and wagon.

DNR: How was it issued to you?

Leo: Sometimes leave it at the park or in town. Depended on the job. I had a pull behind grader for the snow.

DNR: Do you remember any of your fellow workers?

Leo: No. There all gone. Kyle Jacoba but he's dead.

DNR: Do you have any contact with any of your CCC workers?

Leo: No.

DNR: You had country and city kids?

Leo: They were from everywhere.

DNR: Were there any minorities in the camp?

Leo: No.

DNR: Did you learn any specific skills?

Leo: Just running the tractor and drag line.

DNR: Anything you learned in the camp help you when you left?

Leo: It helped on contract work and dragline.

DNR: Do you remember anyone getting injured?

Leo: Maybe a mashed finger. They would take him into town. At the camp we just had a first aid kit.

DNR: Do you recall anyone getting diseases?

Leo: I don't remember.

DNR: Were there any rodent or insect problems?

Leo: Mosquitoes. We sprayed them.

DNR: Did you work in the community?

Leo: No, I never did. I pulled people out of a ditch.

DNR: What contact did you have with local communities?

Leo: We would go to the theater. We couldn't go very far.

DNR: Were there dances?

Leo: I don't remember.

DNR: Were there any Masonic organizations at the camp?

Leo: No.

DNR: Did you have contact with girls?

Leo: Maybe at the rollerskating rink.

DNR: Did you mail letters home?

Leo: Yes.

DNR: Did you have a post office in camp?

Leo: No.

DNR: When did you see your girl?

Leo: Weekends. We would go to the movie or skating rink. Play cards at her home.

DNR: Did you have any problems with the young people in the community?

Leo: No.

DNR: What was your most memorable experience in the camp?

Leo: Moving from camp to camp.

DNR: Any odd experiences?

Leo: No.

DNR: Any major accomplishments in the camp?

Leo: No.

DNR: Do you think your life was changed in the CCC's?

Leo: I guess, but I wouldn't know what it would be.

DNR: What did you do when you left the CCC?

Leo: Dirt contractor. I also worked drag lines for 27 years for the county. We had footlockers and we would push them down the floor which was wet and they would freeze. It was chilly in the barracks. We had three or four army blankets. In Bedford, the barracks had about a foot underneath. Some had eight to ten steps leading up to the barrack's door. The barracks were built by the time we got there. I don't know who built them. I went into the service in '42 and got out in '45. I went to Kansas City then to Augustus, Georgia and then went to Africa. We got married in South Carolina. In North Africa I serviced B-25's. That's why I am hard of hearing.

END OF TRANSCRIPT – SAM J. HAIM - SCRIBE



