

CCC Interview with Sidney Cox

Interviewer: Larry Wilson

Date: February 22, 2002

Sidney Cox's interview is in bold print.

Where was your home town Sid?

Jamaica, Iowa.

How old were you when you went in?

Seventeen.

What did you do before you went to the C's?

Well, not much of anything except just work on the farm, help the guys putting up new windmills.

Why did you enroll in the C's?

Well, because there wasn't anything else to do.

No work, was there?

There was no work and this was a chance to learn something.

Where did you sign up?

I signed up in Guthrie Center and they took us to the camp. They issued us clothing and bedding.

What CCC camps were you assigned to?

Just the one at Guthrie Center, it was Company 2717.

2717?

Yes.

Some of those buildings are still up out there, Sid.

Some of them.

Yes.

But the barracks are all gone, where we lived.

There was one large building there, and I'm not sure what it was used for in the C's days, but when I came to Iowa in 1981 the Conservation Commission used that to store uniforms and some equipment that we gave out to the employees.

Yes. Where was it located in the old camp area?

I remember you pulled up past the ranger's house, and I think it was northeast from there.

Okay.

And there were some smaller buildings there and I think that some of the officers might have stayed there, does that sound right?

Yes.

Maybe sleep about four people.

Yes, because the street ran east and west, and the barracks where the men lived was on the north side of the street. They were kind of going down hill, and the Captain's office was up at the top of the hill on the south side of the street. And then we had the latrine and the shower room, then the mess hall was on down at the end. It was a pretty large hall. There were six barracks.

There were six barracks?

Yes

How many were in a barrack? Do you remember?

If I remember right it was 20. The beds were right down each side. I was a barracks leader in No. 5 barracks and I had an older brother who was barracks leader in No. 6 barracks.

You both were in at the same time?

Yes, we were in there together.

What was the number again, six?

I was the leader in No. 5 barracks.

Your brother was in six?

Yes.

You said, I believe, that you spent all your time there.

I spent all my time there.

When did you work there, or when were you in camp there?

In 1938 for about two years. I was there until they closed the camp and I can't remember just exactly when that was. I stayed on and worked for the Conservation Commission to finish up the cabins that were built on the west side of the lake.

Okay, they're still there too.

Are they?

You say you worked for the Iowa Conservation Commission?

Yes, I remember our boss's name. His name was Barnes; he was from northern Iowa. We had to finish the overnight cabins and there were water lines and septic tanks and stuff to put in yet, and a pump house to build. I remember this Barnes told me to go over and put the rafters up on the pump house. It was a six-sided roof and I ruined about ten 2 x 4's before I could figure out the angles to cut. They had me build the roof. You had to take wooden shingles and they were 4 inches wide. You had to either cut them or find shingles that were broken just that wide. Then you laid that double course, like going down this way. They were laid lengthwise on the ridge. And you laid one this way, then the other one would go this way – you know, to overlap on the edge. And by double coursing them that way, that made it water tight.

What did you call it, Boston what?

Boston ridge. And, of course, as I say I had never heard of a Boston ridge, but he showed me how to do it. The septic tanks were built out of cement for the cabins.

They're probably still there.

Probably. When the boys were working on those and the water was hooked up, one of the boys was down inside of one of the septic tanks, and somebody flushed and of course it was just plain water. But when he heard that water coming down them pipes.

He didn't know it was just plain water?

No, but he got out of there in a hurry anyway.

Do you remember some of those fellows you worked with? Were they pretty much the same ones you were in the barracks with?

No, no they weren't. Because I was in the shop a lot, building those signs, which I worked by myself. There weren't too many others around, even when I was laying water mains.

Did you get along with them okay?

Oh, yes. I don't ever remember having an argument with anybody.

That's great. What contact, if any, have you had with your fellow CCC workers? You said you bought a life insurance policy from this one guy.

Yes, that's only one that I can really remember.

He might still be in Des Moines?

It's possible. I looked in the phone book one day and there's quite a few Wentz in the phone book, but I didn't see an Arthur A.

About the city kids and country kids getting along in camp, some of the kids would come out of the country and some of them come out of the small town, wouldn't they?

I think most of them came out of small towns. I just don't remember of any city boys.

Did you get along okay with the others there?

Oh, yes. Well we did have a little problem with some of the boys, when they first came to camp they didn't want to take a shower. They probably never had a shower. So when they came in at night they'd only put up with that for a few days. Then there would be several of us take one of them, and take him into the shower, forcibly, and give him a GI bath.

Gave him a brush bath, didn't you?

We gave him a brush bath. And that only took once and the next night he went into the shower himself.

Any minority groups there in the camp?

No.

Any Native Americans or African Americans?

No.

Specific skills that you learned in camp... carpentry?

Carpentry was the main one.

I think you said you didn't use it for a profession, though.

No, but I have used them for myself and they have come in handy.

Any injuries at work in the camp?

Don't remember having any injuries.

Did you ever get hurt?

Never.

I talked to a guy the other day over at Williamsburg and one of his jobs was cutting branches off of trees with an ax, and three miles from camp he got himself in the knee with the ax, or hatchet ... it wasn't an ax it was a hatchet.

How about diseases, any diseases in the camp, sicknesses?

I don't ever remember having any, of course we had vaccinations. You know, I had a smallpox vaccination.

Where did you get those?

Got that at camp.

Have any insect and rodent problems?

No, I don't ever remember, course the usual mosquitoes that you have, but other than that I don't know of any. You had to kind of check your sheets every night that somebody didn't slip a snake in bed or short-sheet you.

What work, if any, did you do outside the camp in the community? You mentioned something earlier about going to town and doing some cleaning.

In Guthrie Center, we cleaned the banks of the creek that ran through town and put rock on the banks so they wouldn't wash down, and made all new street signs for the whole town. That's about it as far as I remember about doing any work in Guthrie Center.

Did you get paid extra for that, or was that CCC work?

That was just part of the work that the 3-C's did in the communities.

Did you have any contacts outside of the camp? You lived in Guthrie, did you have family there?

Well, Guthrie County. Jamaica which is right at the edge of the county.

Did you have any contacts like in Guthrie or any other place?

No.

Do you remember any fellowship type of organizations, like Masons or Elks or Odd Fellows?

Nope.

You were pretty young to be involved in that.

Yes.

Did you have any contacts with females during your stay at the camp?

No, we used to go to a skating rink not too far from there. We would walk to a little place called Fansler. There was a skating rink there and we used to walk there.

How far was it?

Couldn't have been more than a couple of miles. We went through a graveyard walking there and the boys had to, of course, scare one kid half to death one night. A bunch of them waited on him coming

back, and they had sheets from their bed over their head and when they popped up from behind those tombstones he really took off running.

Any girls at the skating rink?

I imagine there was, but I don't remember being acquainted with any of them.

Was that a town, Fansler?

It was just a real small place; there was a coal mine there.

Coal mine town?

It was the Fansler Store; I know there was a store there.

It was a small coal mine town?

Yes.

So the people who lived around there probably worked at the coal mine?

Yes, they did.

Were there any problems with these young men in the local community, like at Guthrie?

No, no we never had any problem with any of the local people around there.

How do you think the local community and the people around the camp felt about the C's?

Well, I think they thought very highly of the 3-C's because of all the work we were doing.

Well if you C boys went in to town and cleaned up the stream bank and placed rip-rap and put up new street signs, that was something they liked.

Yes, I never heard of anybody that ever got into any trouble in town.

Do you have one experience that stands out in your mind? Something memorable, more than any other thing that happened at the camp?

No, nothing besides the different things I've mentioned... nothing that's really, really outstanding.

How about strange experiences, did you have anything there?

No, I don't believe so.

What do you think was your biggest accomplishment while you were at camp?

One of the things was learning a trade, and another one was to get along with people. You had to get along, which I think helped myself and a lot of the other boys to learn how to cooperate and work as a team.

There was a lot of that, learning how to get along, take orders, and discipline?

Yes.

How was your life changed by being in the C's, Sid?

Well, by being able to get along with others.

Well, you matured and became a man.

Oh, yeah. You did mature, sometimes a little faster than you wanted to, but it all works out in the long run.

What did you do after leaving the C's?

Well I came to Des Moines.

That would have been what, let's see, you were in there '38 through '39?

I was in '38 to about '40 After the C's I went to work for Erwin Grass pulling house trailers out of Chicago and Detroit.

That's where they were made and you were hauling them?

Yep, hauling them from the factory and he had a lot at E. 14th & Euclid, and then there was one at E. 18th & Grand.

So you would pull those out of Detroit and Chicago?

And I quit him because he got unbearable to work for when he told me I had to think more of my job than I did of my own mother.

Wrong priority there, in my opinion.

I walked out. Then I went to work for Williams Motor Company down at 8th & Park Street. I was working there and then I was drafted into the Army. I had tried to enlist and they wouldn't take me because I only had one eye.

You couldn't enlist but they drafted you?

They drafted me and I went in the Army as I say, when we were inducted out at Camp Dodge. They put me in charge of all the fellows going to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. So they got into Des Moines here and they said "you can board the train after 9:00 p.m., the train leaves at midnight." There was about 15 of the fellows and one wanted to go here and one there, and I said "No, you're not going to get scattered all over town." These boys had never been to Des Moines before.

Probably Iowa guys, you think?

Yes, they were, and so I said "You're all going to have to stick together." Well, that kind of took the wind out of their sails I think. And most of them went to bed right after 9 o'clock.

Where did they go, Fort Sill?

Yes, Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Did you go with them?

Yes. I went in the Army as the instructor in a motor school. Course, I had had experience. My Dad had a garage when I was about 7 years old and I had been around mechanic work all my life. I didn't even have any basic training when I went in the Army.

Really?

I just went in as an instructor down there and we taught officers from every allied country in the world.

Instructor in mechanics and motors?

Yes, I taught half-tracks. It was a 12 week course and you only had your students for one week and they passed on to another instructor for a different phase.

Where did you do that, Fort Sill?

Fort Sill, I was there for a little over 2 years and I was so sick of that place. Another boy and I was in the bay room one day and the first sergeant posted a notice that they were taking volunteers for overseas duty. We beat him back to the orderly room to sign up. He said "I don't know what you guys are getting into, whether it's an infantry outfit or what." We said "We don't care as long as we get out of here." So I told the Major the next morning that I had volunteered for overseas duty and he said "Well, they won't let you go ... you're limited service." I said "well, we'll see." He said "well, I won't release you." And I said "Major, I don't think you're going to have anything to say about it." Well it wasn't a week and I had my orders to report to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, and we went overseas. We went over on the Queen Elizabeth.

Then what?

We landed in South Hampton, or in Glasgow, Scotland, because that was the only place that could take us at that time ... the other ports were blown up. So we got on a train and went to South Hampton.

Where did you get off?

Glasgow, Scotland.

Then what did you do?

Took a train to South Hampton, then we crossed the channel one night, and we got into a replacement depot in France. The first night there, a tornado went through and tore down the tents. We lost all of our clothing, only what we had on our back. So then we had to get a supply truck to get us some more. I was there about a week and they assigned me to a Signal Service Long Lines Outfit, and I thought, well, what do I know about signal service and long lines, but I forgot they had a whole fleet of trucks to keep running. I was a Motor Sergeant then, and as we moved up from one place to another and finally moved into Paris, there I ran a big maintenance shop with 141 civilian mechanics.

French?

Everything. I had French, Italian, Belgians, red Russians, and white Russians.

What was that called, Motor Pool?

Yes, we took care of all the equipment for Seine section as well as our own. I was in the 3160th Signal Service Battalion. We had our own vehicles plus all of the vehicles from Seine section.

So you had people there that could fix about anything?

Yes, they had to skills and of course you had to watch them. You couldn't put a red Russian and a white Russian together, they'd kill each other. And I called the French Labor Board, and they sent a girl out to keep records because the government over there had to know where everyone was and what they were doing. I had a Motor Officer for a little while. He came into the shop and he (he was drunk when he got there) motioned me out of the office and into the shop and he said "Is that the best looking girl you could get?" and I said "Lieutenant, I didn't get one to look at, I got one to work. Now if you want a girl, go out on the street and whistle."

He asked you that, huh?

He says "I don't have to look at her." And I said "No, you don't." I don't know whatever happened to him. The Captain said he had been a 2nd Lieutenant for I don't know how many years. He said "If I have anything to do with it, he'll stay a 2nd Lieutenant the rest of his life."

Not a good sign if he's been a second lieutenant very long, is it?

No.

So how long were you there?
Until I came home.

When did you get out, do you remember?

'46, yes, 1946. I was a Staff Sergeant and our Captain kept wanting me to sign over, to stay over there when my time was up. He said "I'll make you a Master Sergeant if you'll stay over." And I said "Captain, you give me enough stripes to look like a zebra and I'm not going to stay over here."

You wanted to go home?

We had moved our battalion headquarters up to Frankfurt, Germany, soon as the war was over. And we all got up there one night and got to partying, and some of us signed over. We got back to company headquarters in Paris and I said "Captain, that was kind of chicken of you," I said "getting us drunk and then having us sign over." He said "well, your service record is down at headquarters." He said "do you know anybody down there?" I said "Oh, yeah." A lot of the Colonels and Generals, I was giving them gas to do their running around, and I called this Colonel and told him exactly what had happened and he said "can you get hold of your service record?" I said "Yes." He said "well, you get your service record and tear that page out and I'll pull your records over here at the Seine section headquarters." The orders had come through that everyone with my number of points could go home.

So you could go home, if you hadn't signed over?

Yes, but when he pulled my records out of Seine section, I tore the page out of my book and, no record. So I got to come home with the rest of the guys.

That was when, '46?

Yep, in '46.

56 years ago.

Yes, that's been a long time ago.

What did you do then, when you got back?

Well, I went back to work for Williams Motor Company and I had worked there for just a little while, and Ruan sent word over that he wanted to talk to me. So I went over and I talked to him, and we argued back and forth for some time for several weeks, and finally I went to work for him as Shop Foreman. I started with him at the cab company.

Is that the old man - John?

Yes, the old man. I worked for John for 36 years.

Treat you okay?

Oh, yes, we'd get in small arguments.

He had good cabs, didn't he? Did he start out with those, or with trucks?

No, he started out with trucks. John started hauling gravel with a gravel truck. He came from the little town of Beacon down here, south of Knoxville.

What did you do? Take care of the trucks and cabs, and do maintenance?

Yes, the cabs and then we got into the truck leasing. We were there at 11th and Grand, then we moved down there to SW 6th & Tuttle and got into the truck leasing business. I had all of the cabs, all of the

Avis Rent-A-Cars, had lease cars and lease trucks... and trying to run a shop 24 hours a day, 3 shifts, I didn't get much sleep most of the time.

So you were in charge of the maintenance and upkeep in keeping those going?
Yes.

That's a lot of vehicles.
Yes, it finally got too much.

So did you retire from there?
I retired there in January of 1985.

How old are you now, Sid?
Eighty.

Let's go back and talk about your days there in camp. What time would you wake up?
They woke us up at 6 o'clock. We had a bugler.

So he'd blow off there at 6 o'clock? Then, what did you do? Get up and get dressed?
Had to get up and get dressed and you rushed outside to stand revelry and raise the flag.

Raised the flag up and when did you go back in and make the bed and get everything else in shape there?
As soon as you stood revelry, then you went back and made up your bed and got everything ready, and you had breakfast and after breakfast you had to stand inspection.

So you were out there a couple of times? You would go out to revelry and everybody is accounted for.
Yep.

Raise the flag at that time?
Yep.

Then back in and clean up the barracks and make the beds tight enough so a quarter would bounce?
Yep.

And then breakfast?
Yep.

And then outside for inspection?
No, you had to stand beside your bed.

And that's when the Captain would come through and do the coin thing?
That's right, you kind of stood at attention when the Captain went by and looked everything over.

Then when that inspection was over... then what? Go to work?
Everybody went to work. Of course, they had trucks to take us over into the park. Course, I didn't. Most of the time I stayed right there at camp working.

Have you been back out to Springbrook, lately, past 10-20 years?

In 1983, at the 50th anniversary when Branstad gave everybody, I don't know if any of the guys had these or not.

That was 1983?

That was in '83. See that was 50 years from the time it started. It started in '33. Now here's a clipping out of the Bagley Gazette that my sister sent me, on that 50th anniversary. Now this picture, they got the names a little bit wrong on the line up...I'm behind ... well you can't hardly see me...right here.

This is you here?

Yes, but according to this I'm over here. This was Thursday, July the 14th of 83.

That was in the Bagley paper?

Bagley Gazette.

What's the name of the guy that puts that paper out? I used to know him.

I don't recall.

No, that was down the road. What's the next town down the road west?

Bayard.

Did you know this guy Clarence Pearson?

Yes, he was a ...They talked about Bernie Hossman in there. They say he was a member here at the Post. He passed away about 2 years ago. He was the one that was from Moorhead Camp.

Well that was nice of her to send you that. 1983, that's been 20 years ago.

Yes, I guess it is. I don't want that, if they have any use for that, they can have that, too.

Sure, and this?

Yes.

Okay, so for the record here, Sid is giving me a clipping out of the Bagley Gazette dated Thursday, July 14, 1983, which talks about the 50 year CCC reunion. And you're also going to give us this book ?

Yes.

He is also going to give us - what do we call this, a training manual?

Training manual.

A training manual for his carpentry class, and we appreciate that. And then a picture, too, or did you want that?

No, I don't need it.

Also, he's giving us a black and white picture of Springbrook State Park Lake, and that shows the diving tower. It's taken from the North, looking to the South and you can see the Springbrook dam at the back of the picture. It really doesn't look a whole lot different than it looks today, with the exception of the tower, and I'm not sure what they've got out there. So these guys would be in the class, this was your class?

Right, yep.

Worked them at night too - six o'clock to 10:15 at night?

Yes.

There's a little mathematics in here.

Yep.

How to build windows, huh? Put in the door head jambs.

I've got training manuals from World War II of the half track put out by Goodyear Rubber. Course Goodyear made the tracks.

Were they rubber?

Yes, with metal lengths on them but it talks about the engine and all. Then I've got another one about the different oils that the Army used, and it's so far a cry from what it is today. Course back then they didn't have detergent oil, it was all non-detergent. So when we gave them a test you almost had to take each one of them separately and explain to them. The Russians thought what you couldn't do by brute strength couldn't be done. You'd show them how to put a track back on using a kind of a knack to it, if you'd get it just right and you could give it a flip up over the rear idler. Show them how to do it, turn your back, and they'd get a 6-foot crowbar and try to pry it on, and they couldn't. You'd go back and show them again and they would insist on doing it their way and they were all big, strong guys. And we also had high movers for the 155 millimeters rifles, which was a very large truck, and the bed on the truck was probably over 4-foot off the ground. And I saw one of those Russian officers take a tire and wheel and just bounce it like a ball, and pick it up and toss it up in the back end of the truck. And I'd think I don't want to be between them.

You don't want to get in the boxing ring with them.

The ones from Brazil, I'll never forget the time they came in and we thought they were German officers, and they wore uniforms exactly like the Germans. The high polished boots and they walked the goose step just like ...and we all thought.... well, what in the world are German officers doing here. But they were from Brazil.

Were they there for training?

Yes, and of course being nothing but officers, our Colonel told us "If you want to salute them in the morning you can, but you don't have to". You guys have more to do than stand around, because that's all you have are officers." And every once in a while we would get a 2nd Lieutenant that would insist that we salute them. So then we would have to go talk to the Colonel, and the Colonel would set him straight right quick. But I had one Lieutenant, I could not keep him awake, he would go to sleep. And one day I said (it was raining) and he was asleep and I said "Lieutenant, go over and stand by the window." He stood over there by the window, raining in on him, but sound asleep again. Finally, they always had an officer in charge of each class that kept up the record. Yes, they were quite a bunch. When we first started we only had about, each instructor only had about 7 or 8 men. When I left there we had 35 men.

Per instructor?

Per instructor. You knew the good ones and you knew the bad ones, the rest of them got an average grade because that's all we could do. You only had them a week.

Then they moved on to somebody else?

They moved on to the next instructor.

How long did that whole course take?

Twelve weeks. The Major called me in one day and he said "You know, you gave a man a grade that's been back to his outfit for 6 weeks." I said "very possible." And I said you know the first guy that made a mistake is the man in charge of the class, he should have pulled his records right there. And I said "then five before me have given him a grade." He said "what do you think I ought to do with you?" And I said "Major, I really don't care what you do with me. I came in the Army a Private and I can go out a Private, it doesn't make any difference to me." Finally he said "Well, we used to have to show training films at night, one night a month." I had to go for a whole month because I gave a man a grade that had been back to his outfit. I told the Major "Well, you know having him a week, and with this many men I know the good ones and I know the bad ones."

Everybody else gets an average grade?

Everybody else gets an average grade. You just couldn't do it any other way that I knew of. Anyway, he was happy and I didn't care ...I was in the Army for the duration.

Those CCC days were pretty good days, weren't they Sid?

Yes they were. I think all the boys learned a lot and I know that the few that I can remember all went ahead and made something of their life, and didn't turn out to end up in jail.

Did you say at the beginning some Arkansas guys were up here?

Oh, yes. There were a lot of boys from Arkansas, in our camp anyway. Course there were so many camps around Iowa, I don't know how many there were, really.

Well I saw some information that said there were 16 camps. I mentioned that to a guy and he said "No, I think there was more than that in Iowa."

I don't think so. I imagine that is about right because around here, well there was one down at Ahquabi, one near Guthrie Center. There was one over close to Moorhead.

Moorhead is in western Iowa, isn't it?

Yes, right. I want to say Green Valley, but I don't think there was one at Green Valley.

Bedford, there's one down around Bedford.

Yes, Bedford ... right.

I might have mentioned that I have an uncle over in Illinois. He joined up in central Illinois and they sent him to Utah. I talked to a guy in Indianola the day before yesterday, and he said he signed up at Sioux City. They put him on a train down to Omaha and they thought they were going west. They didn't tell them where they were going and they shipped them to Arkansas. He said there was just damn near a riot on that train when they found out they were going to Arkansas. He said once they got there they were okay.

I know we had quite a few from Arkansas.

How were they?

They were good; they were like a little more backward probably than some of the other boys. I don't think that holds true today, but back then some of them had never been out of the back woods until they came here.

Do you have anything other than this material here?

I don't think so. I can look some more, I could have some other stuff.

Well, if you run across anything don't throw it away.

Yes, okay.

We really appreciate this. It's probably going to be placed in the museum at Backbone.

Okay.

This is the first one of these I've seen. (Not sure what the item was that I was shown). Anything else?

No, I don't believe so.

Well, I've enjoyed the visit with you Sid.

I've kind of enjoyed it since I started and I had really forgotten a lot of stuff until I put my mind to work and got to thinking back about a few different things.

I'm going to shut off the tape recorder now; it's about 3:30 p.m. This ends the interview with Sidney Cox.

Reviewed, updated and some grammatical changes made by Larry Wilson on August 31, 2005 after visiting with Sid Cox.



