

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM: Civilian Conservation Corps Project

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INTERVIEWEE James F. Canterbury  
DATE July 24, 1982  
INTERVIEWER Shirley J. Puy  
DATE 7-24-82

(May be on CCC list  
as Canterberry)

JAMES CANTERBURY

7-24-82

Interviewer: Shirley Pine

Q. What is your name, please?

A. I am James Canterbury from Tyler, Texas. I served in camp 3767, Hollis, Arkansas.

Q. Can you tell me a little bit about your background - your family, where you were born, number of people in your family, and your parents.

A. I was born in Huttig, Arkansas and we moved up to England, Arkansas when I was nine months old. It was me and my brother just older than me and my mother and daddy and I. I had an older brother and three sisters. I am the baby of the family and they were all quite a bit older than me except my brother just older than me. We lived on a farm out there and I'm sorry to say my dad left and my mother was a widow woman then. I chopped cotton, my brother and I, for years. I was born Dec. 1, 1922. We were raised out there on that farm, my mother, my brother and I and when I was eleven years old in 1934 on August 1 my mother died. So it was a pretty rough time. My brother who was just older than me went into Sheridan, Arkansas and served in the CCC awhile and then he came out and then he went back to Iowa and served again. After my mother died in 1934 my older brother, the only brother I had, we had to make a decision what to do. He was 13 and I was 11. I had three married sisters, one was in Louisiana that was married when I left which I had seen her a few times but was not as familiar as with the other two. So my brother who still lives in Lonoke, Arkansas, he will be 80 years old next year, he raised me and my brother, we were raised on a farm down there. Times were hard and we were poor. When I was about 18 my brother had been in the CCC so I wanted to go so I went in. I didn't get the education I could have probably. My brother did all he could under the conditions. So I finished the eighth grade. Then I went in the CCC and he had a gentleman there, Mr. Cope, and I took some typing and did some studying under him. I had never been away from home and I got acquainted with boys from different parts of the country and state. I stayed in the CCC camp up there for about a year and half.

Q. What kind of work did they do at Hollis?

We ran a forest service camp. We built roads, we fought forest fires; I did that four or five months, then I went in training to be a truck driver and I finished up as a truck driver the last year there. I hauled people out to build roads and fight forest fires and protect the forests.

Q. There was an educational program then, was it optional?

A. Yes, you didn't have to take them. I remember one boy couldn't read or write. We got acquainted and I'd write letters home for him. This is an experience, to write letters to mother and girlfriend, for someone else. These incidents I suppose helped me grow up. I was AWOL the day the war came on, I had gone up to the mountains to see my girl, another guy and I, his name was A D Johnson, I'll never forget him. The camp had closed and I helped haul it off, a lot of it to Little Rock, and they transferred it to Lake Catherine in the park service down there building those ponds, and I stayed there a couple of months. The war had come in then and I wanted to go into the service so my daddy had come home then and was staying with my brother also. I entered in the summer of 1940, came out in February 1942, was about four months at Lake Catherine in Hot Springs.

Q. What kind of sleeping and eating arrangements did you have in camp?

A. We would work for the forest service, fighting fires, drainage, set out trees, keep the roads from washing. But when we would come back into camp the army more or less would be in charge of the food, and the camp. Capt. Hall was the captain there and he went into the service and Lt. Hankins took over. They were both fine men. The leaders were regular army people.

- Q. How would you describe a day, like what you did when you got up in the morning, through the day, in terms of the activities?
- A. We'd get up at the regular time, we'd line up and go to chow and then we would line up and be assigned to the forest service during the day. We had foremen that had certain areas. I worked with a foreman named Martin, I drove the truck for his crew there. We would go out, I would set up a telephone on the side of the road, hang it over a line and I'd set there during the day while they were working, listening for the tower to call in case there was a fire. Along about ten o'clock I would get in the truck and go back to camp and load up the chow in cans, we'd go back and check up, then set the food up on the side of the road where we were working and serve the meal. Then I would go back to my position of answering the phone in case of fire and then pick them up around 4 o'clock to go back to camp. We would go in and clean up and then stand retreat and the flag would go down, then we'd eat supper. Then we were pretty well on our own. The food was fine, we all gained weight. We had some excellent cooks at Hollis.
- Q. How about recreation and sports? I've heard they had softball.
- A. Yes, there were sports there. I didn't play too much ball, I don't remember a ball field at Hollis. We had a recreation hall where we could shoot pool, play cards, things like that. We were in the mountains and didn't do a lot of hiking and jogging in those days. We'd get out and dig ditches and work with picks and shovels during the day a lot of times and didn't need the exercise.
- Q. Did you do morning calisthenics?
- A. Oh yes, we did calisthenics. We would get out and we would line up just like the army and do exercises - pushups, etc.
- Q. Were there a lot of people dropping out, going to see girls in the woods, etc.?
- A. No, not really. And this is one good thing about the CCC camp, the discipline was real good. Everybody looked upon each other to do their part and we had very few problems of discipline in the whole camp.
- Q. How about the money - was there any going back to your family?
- A. We were paid \$30 a month. I drew \$8 a month and they were sending \$22 a month home when I went in. They talked to my brother and decided they would keep it for me. So they kept my \$22 a month all the time I was in there and I drew \$8 a month for about a year and a half I was in there. When I came out, then they sent me a check for all that I had in, I think it was 300 and some odd dollars. I thought I was rich. That \$8 bought my cigarettes, cokes, they furnished our clothes, khakis in the summer and a wool-type suit in the winter and regular GI shoes.
- Q. Did you receive additional training of any kind in addition to the forestry work?
- A. No, more or less on the job training. I did go to this class to drive a truck.
- Q. You must have felt lonesome being away from home for the first time.
- A. This was the first time I had ever been away from home and during the work hours and days it wasn't so lonesome. On the weekends when a lot of boys would go home it would get kind of lonesome. About every four or five months I'd catch a bus and go back down to England.
- Q. In terms of recreational activities, was there any town around?
- A. Not there. I never did go to Hot Springs or Jessieville, a little town 8 or 10 miles up the road. A lot of the single boys would go to town looking for girls but as far as recreation, our work was our recreation. We didn't have money to go anywhere or do anything.

- Q. Were there any letters left that you might have written at that time, either that your family has or that you have?
- A. I have a foot locker that possibly there is a letter to my brother. I would write home some. As far as I know there is none left. I have some pictures of some of the boys and a company picture of the camp.
- Q. How did your family feel about your being in the CCC?
- A. I really don't know. My brother and his wife were raising their own family then.
- Q. When you left the CCC in the spring of 1942, what did you do?
- A. I felt I was needed at home so I came out and went home. My brother was home from the Iowa camp and we worked there that summer and the war was going on and he was drafted but he failed his physical, we didn't know why. In June or July we were working for the county down there cleaning out some ditches and we went to England on a Saturday night and he had a hemorrhage and in September he died with TB. He was 21 years old. He told us after he got sick that when he was in camp in Sheridan he had had one when he was out in the woods and didn't tell anyone about it.
- Q. Now, that's interesting. There is no question about health here. Did they make any health checks to prevent anyone going in CCC with TB?
- A. They gave me a lot of shots, but whether they X-rayed us I don't remember. Evidently they didn't X-ray my brother because they would have caught it. We carried him to Booneville but his lungs were completely gone by that time.
- Q. I am wondering about diseases being spread if there were no health checks.
- A. I know we had a hospital at Mollis and if we got sick we would go over there and they would shoot me with these three shots for chills. When I was growing up I had chills, but they did give us shots.
- Q. Did they give you a physical when you entered the Corps?
- A. Yes, I don't remember just what all it consisted of, it probably wasn't as strict as the army was.
- Q. I wonder if anyone was rejected for physical reasons in the CCC?
- A. I don't know. My brother was rejected by the army.
- Q. So you had a rough year after you got out?
- A. It was rough. Finally I decided I'd just join the army and I volunteered for the Air Force in 1942.
- Q. Were some things you learned in the CCC useful in the Air Force? What was your highest rank and battalion?
- A. Before I went in the CCC I went up to Dykes Colony. I had two sisters who lived up there, this was a government project, they were married and had nothing to do so they went up there and so-called "buy" these homes. So I stayed up there during the summer some, and I went in Camp Robinson out here with a friend of mine across the road, what they called a CMTC camp - Citizens Military Training Camp - and I went in that and served a month there, that was military training. So when I went in the service my experience in the CCC with the boys and the discipline and recognizing authority helped me. When I went into the Air Force it helped me enough when they hollered attention I knew how to stand and how to act.
- Q. Did any of the education or any training prove useful?
- A. The training of discipline and recognizing authority and being around other boys and living with boys all prepared me for the Army. I volunteered for the Army and went to Shepard Field, Texas. I was a ground force and I took my basic training at Shepard Field. Then they transferred me to West Palm Beach, Florida. Then in February 1942 I went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and they processed us through and we got on a boat, the old James Parker, and the battleship Arkansas was right ahead of us.

We stopped in Casa Blanca and the convoy went on around, I think, and made an invasion somewhere up there. The Air Force people went south to a place called Pakarati - that's where we unloaded from the ship. I went to Legis, Nigeria for two-three months - they flew me down there, first airplane I'd ever been on in my life and I was scared to death. There we assembled some D-40's for General Chenault, the Flying Tigers up in China. Then we went back to Acroll which was the main base, on the African Gold Coast, it was British. It is called Gada now, you read about it so much in the papers. We were on a supply line into China called African Middle East Wing. I stayed there from March 13, 1942 and that was the day my daddy died and the Red Cross got the message to me sometime in April. I stayed there till July 2, 1945. I flew back to Miami Beach, Florida and they assigned me to Adams Field, Little Rock delay enroute, then I went to Lonoke and that's when I got married. I got out November 1945 at Barksdale Field. My highest rank was corporal. One of the boys I was with over there, William Oxner, was in the CCC with me. I met him up at Camp Kilmer on the boat and we recognized each other. We spent 35 days on that boat.

Q. After you left the military where did you settle?

A. I had married while I was in the service and I came out in 1945. I rice farmed a year in Lonoke and saw that this wasn't for me. I came to Little Rock and worked first one place and then another for a couple of years, then I went back to England and began to farm. I found out about the GI Bill, which hadn't been explained very clearly when we got out, and I found out through other men that were going, and I went to on-the-job training school, farming in England for a couple years. I drew \$97 a month and learned something about farming. I had two children and decided this was not for me. There was a man who went to our church who was a foreman on the railroad. He told me and another boy that he would hire us for a couple months that winter but would have to lay us off the first of January. So I went to work for the railroad for a couple of months. In January when he laid us off he said we might get on at Pine Bluff. So I went down there and got transferred in the signal department and have been in that ever since. I am signal manager for the Continental Railroad for 30 years.

Q. You said your wife taught school?

A. She was teaching school at England when I came back. She was 19. She was a high school graduate, not a collage graduate. She taught for awhile and then quit. We have three children, two girls and a boy. We have six grandchildren now, and my son is 22 and working with the signal department of the Southern Pacific Railroad in Houston. I left Tyler in 1952 when I went to work at Pine Bluff. I got moved back and forth a lot but went back to Tyler in 1979 and have been there ever since.

Q. What is your opinion of the CCC and what do you think its contribution was in the period 1933 to 1942?

A. I think it was one of the grandest things that ever came out. One thing, it helped a lot of parents financially and gave the boys something to do. We were teenage boys with nothing to do, no money to go anywhere. I personally think it made me grow up more than anything in my life.

Q. What about the general contribution to the economy in that period? You mentioned giving some income to parents..

A. I remember some who got \$22 from their son, that was all they had to live on.

Q. What do you think about the money it brought in the state?

A. There were a lot of camps here. In the camp I was in the best I remember it was all Arkansas boys, but I know a lot of Arkansas boys went out of state. I don't know of any out-of-state boys coming to Arkansas but there probably were some. It

had to help. WPA was going on this time too. People had to have something to do. I tell my children now they just don't realize what it means when there is no money. There was work to be done but no money to pay. There was lots of good there, we lived closer together, we had respect for each other, we could lay our billfold on the ground and nobody would touch it, where now you have to nail everything down. But now I can work a day and buy a good suit, so I would rather see it now with money close around you might get a little of it. But when there's not any money then times are hard.

- Q. Congress has passed a bill to re-institute the CCC. How do you feel about this and what do you see its possible contribution might be?
- A. I can see that there are lots of boys that it would help, but I can see some problems the way the trend is now that they would have some discipline problems, burning down things. Where we didn't think this way at all and get a bunch of boys together now it would help some but I think they would really have to have some security action for discipline. We were proud of our camp, proud as of our own home. And this is the feeling that you're going to have to have for it to be helpful. There's lots of work they could do and lots of good that could come from it, but discipline could be a problem.
- Q. I've asked you a lot of questions about your experiences with the CCC. There might be something I haven't asked. If you think of something you want to discuss please do so. I haven't pursued parties, recreational or social activities.
- A. There was very little social life. We would go off and see these girls. we went up in the hills one time and bought a half gallon of moonshine for 50¢ in a jar, we drank a swallow or two and it made us sick and threw the rest away. I never saw any of the boys drunk the whole year and a half I was in.
- Q. Can you think of any other information that might furnish help for a research project?
- A. Other than the fire fighting which we did a lot of and the raking of lines around these fires, this was what I was in most of the forest service. We built some roads and would go down through the woods and cut these motor ways so they could get down to the fires.
- Q. What kind of things do you visit about when you come to a reunion like this?
- A. Well, I go up through those mountains by Hollis where I was in camp and I fall in love with the mountains of Arkansas and the Ouachita forests. I come through every chance I get. Just to talk about old times and reminisce about things that happened.
- Q. Do you plan your trips to your relatives here at this particular time?
- A. No, last year I found out about this reunion through a friend of mine who takes the Sheridan paper, and that's when I wrote Mr. Ratcliff and found out about it. Last year we had a death in the family, my wife lost her sister just two or three days before this came up. We did plan a week vacation, we came to Hot Springs, Daisy Park, and came up through here, and we have a room at Hot Springs, made a special trip for this.  
I suppose all the boys that were in there like I was, it helped them grow up and get away from home and have something to do. They built the ponds down around Lake Catherine. We built this girl scout camp out here at Lake Sylvia. We built some dams.
- Q. When you were in the service, did you find you ran into a lot who had been in the CCC?
- A. Yes, but since I've been out of service you'd be surprised at how many men were in there, just like me, they had to have something to do and a lot of them had families to take care of.