

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW RELEASE FORM: Civilian Conservation Corps Project  
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INTERVIEWEE W. S. Stapleton H. L. STAPLETON  
DATE 7/24/82  
INTERVIEWER ERIC MELVIN  
DATE 7/24/82

H. L. STAPLETON

7/24/82

Interviewer: Eric Melvin

Q. What is your name, please.

A. H. L. Stapleton

Q. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, who your parents were?

A. I was born at Riley, Arkansas. My mother's name was Myrtle Stapleton, her maiden name was Smith. My dad's name was Hugh Stapleton. He was born and raised on Huckleberry Mountain in the Ozark National Forest.

Q. Were your brothers and sisters older or younger than you?

A. I have one brother older than me, two brothers and two sisters younger than I am.

Q. Were any of them involved in the CCC?

A. None of them. I am the only one. My dad was in. He was in Co. 1981. I think that was the camp number, at Camp Pettit Jean on Petit Jean Mountain. He helped build that state park. He was there seven years. He is a WWI veteran. There were a lot of them in there too. When I was in we had what we called the hog log, who were in two years or were 21 years old who had to get out of there. But his situation was different.

Q. How much education did you have before you entered the CCC?

A. I quit in the ninth grade and went in the CCC.

Q. How old were you when you entered the CCC?

A. About 16 I think.

Q. How did you learn about it?

A. Through some of the people at Paris in the county building. I had a number of friends up there and some of them told me about it. My dad was already in there anyway. They are the ones who suggested that I join and see what I could do.

Q. What were your reasons for going in primarily?

A. Financial, mainly. There was no work for anybody. It was hard times in 1937-38 back then.

Q. What type of work had you been doing?

A. I would stay with families and help them farm and work for \$10 a month and board and room. That was big money then for a 16-year-old.

Q. You family didn't own a farm themselves?

A. They owned it but my other brothers and sisters worked there.

Q. When and where did you enlist in the CCC?

A. when I enlisted I went to Greenbrier, which is out from Conway. That was a soil conservation camp at that time. They disbanded it I guess along about the time I went in because they had done all the soil erosion work they could do that would benefit anybody substantially, so then I went into the forest end of it at Peron. If you take Morrilton, Hot Springs, and Little Rock and triangularize it, it would be right in the middle of the triangle. It is in Prairie County. I was there the remainder of my tenure, almost two years. I went in in 1937 and came out in January or February 1939.

- Q. Did you receive any particular type of training while you were there?
- A. We cut fire trails, learned equipment operation. I didn't do that type of work but I learned how it's done. How to build the old time rock bed. I think they learned that in soil erosion work. Where the trees and branches grew across the road you know how it would wash it out and keep washing deeper and deeper. What we did, we would bed it with rocks and spread it out instead of it being two feet deep and ten feet wide we would make it maybe 40-50 feet wide and six inches deep. It didn't erode the soil and you could go through there at all times. We learned to build telephone lines, the old time web line, they would have two lines and cross every third telephone pole to keep the run out. They were building lookout towers. We also learned about prefabrication of buildings, we would prefabricate the building and then haul it out and put it together.
- Q. It sounds like a lot of manual labor. I guess it was pretty hot?
- A. It was Arkansas, and you know how Arkansas gets, and it involved pick and shovel, and rake, that type of work, with the old maddox, if you are familiar with what a maddox is. It has like a grub hoe on one end and a double bladed ax on the other. It is quite heavy. The only machinery I operated was as a training thing only, not actually working because I don't think they trusted me that much. We had the little what they called cleat tracks then, they were about the size of a tractor but they were built like a bulldozer. I learned to operate those things and the fundamentals of it, that's all.
- Q. You said you joined when you were 16 - I thought they admitted only 18-year-olds, or 17.
- A. I didn't tell them the truth. A number of them did this.
- Q. What did you do when you weren't working in the camp - what sort of activities?
- A. We had school. We had five days in the field, they called it, that was powerline work, that type of thing. And then on the sixth day we had to work four hours for the army. That consisted of cutting wood, policing the area, paint, that type of thing. Also we had schooling. As a matter of fact, I met the assistant educational director when I was there down here earlier today. Walter Burdock was the educational director. You had to go to school, you had to attend so many hours, you had to maintain a reasonable grade or you didn't get Saturday afternoon and Sunday off to go home or go to town or whatever you wanted to do. Even so though in high fire danger seasons they kept a fire fighting crew there, usually half of the company would have to stay there every other weekend.
- Q. Was this leading for the complete high school?
- A. I qualified for the GED. We had to take history, I don't remember all we had to take, but I took the test. I was in the Navy 31 months after I got out of there, so it was after that.
- Q. Did you attend any college after that?
- A. I attended junior college for specific courses.
- Q. After you left the CCC you joined the Navy?
- A. This was probably 1942, after war was declared. I worked for the forest service awhile after I got out of CCC camp, in Magazine Ranger District, on a lookout tower, on Huckleberry Mountain. Ranger William P. Dale was the ranger and A. L. Williams was the assistant ranger. They built up that forest. At the time there was a CCC company on Magazine Mountain, and I believe they are the ones that left Peron.
- Q. Did you work mainly fighting forest fires at the time?
- A. It was an observation tower. We had what we called the Osborn fire finder that would take cross readings and tell the CCC boys where the fires were.

- Q. Would you say that your training in the CCC helped you get that job in the forest service?
- A. If I hadn't been in CCC camp I would never even have thought about it. Certainly it did, because I understood the importance of fire protection and then of course extinguishing it if it did get started - you're going to have that with electric storms and such. I couldn't have qualified if it had not been for my CCC training.
- Q. Did you do any more of that type of work later on in your life?
- A. No, when I came out of the Navy I worked for a research outfit for nine years and then went into the police department in the San Francisco Bay area, for 23 years. However I got my necessary education, my high school diploma, in the CCC. Let me say that this was the time when Pretty Boy Floyd and Raymond Hamilton, Lloyd Hamilton, all of those worms were crawling out of the wood, and I could have gone that way easily if I hadn't joined the CCC. There was no money, and no work. We had a pretty good chaplain at camp too and I learned a lot about the more important values of life.
- Q. Back to the camp where you were. What sort of recreation facilities did you have?
- A. We didn't have much. We had ping pong, we would have to go down to school to play ball, mostly indoor type games. We'd set around the rec hall and listen to music on the radio if it worked, we had one radio that didn't even have a cabinet. We didn't have too much time for recreation really. By the time you went to school, did your work in the field, and your four hours on Saturday, and wrote letters, there wasn't much time for recreation. Most of us were country people and we liked country environment anyway. It's the factory work, and that kind of thing that becomes boring, and not when you are out in nature like that. I never got bored with it.
- Q. Were you able to go home very often?
- A. Yes, I went home about once a month. I couldn't afford it. I think it cost \$4 to go to New Plain and back. Chester Woodall lived down there and he had a pickup and he would haul a half dozen of us for \$4 each. And I only got \$6 a month anyway. Then I had to do my laundry, buy candy and Bull Durham and roll my own. So we didn't have a lot of money to waste.
- Q. Was there much bootleg liquor or anything else?
- A. Bootleg liquor was available if you wanted it.
- Q. You said they sent money to your parents?
- A. They got \$24 and I got \$6. Then I became assistant leader and worked up to \$36 a month, so I got \$12 a month after doing about a year, that's about 20¢ a day.
- Q. Could you describe a typical day in the CCC?
- A. You rolled out of there about 6:30 in the morning, somebody would yell to get out of there, they had an individual in charge of each barracks. You would go eat and then load out in the trucks. In the wintertime it would be dark. They had 1937 Dodge vehicles with a tarpaulin pulled over it and those wooden ribs to hold it up. It got real cold in there. We would drive over roads that were barely passable, so we'd get out there on the job as soon as we could. We would work 2½ hours, then eat, then work 2½ more hours, then we'd load up and go back to camp. They would let us if we knew we wouldn't have fire duty, and we wanted to go home on the weekend, we could leave Friday night and get back to work Monday morning. They'd let us cut wood one or two hours now and then to keep the fires going. Another major expense too - each individual who lived in that barracks would give the person who got up and built the fire 25¢ a month, and he made big money, there

were probably 50 people in there and he made \$12.50 a month. So we could work our army time in and then not have to stay on the weekend. Sometime there would be a big fire danger and they would have to have everybody there just in case. You could always stockpile it too.

Q. Was the food good, or was it just eatable?

A. We had jam and peanut butter sandwiches, two of those, and I don't remember what we had to drink, and that's just about it as far as out in the field was concerned. But they had real good nutritious food in camp. Sometimes they'd cook what they called slungullion, fix a big pot of it and take it out in the field. It had everything including parts of the kitchen sink in it. It wasn't bad when you had been working out in the field.

Q. When you went to camp, was this the first time you'd left home?

A. Oh no, my older brother and I had hitchhiked all over the country, from Texas back to Kentucky. It was a big family, and I'd spent most of my time anyway working for other families at \$10 a month. I had a girlfriend was the main reason I wanted to go back, and we got married and had two children.

Q. Did you keep in touch with your family and friends by writing them?

A. I would write about once a week. You know postage was 3¢ then, and that came out of my salary too!

Q. Since your father was in the CCC, I imagine your family was happy that you were in too - is that right?

A. I don't think I ever heard them voice an opinion one way or the other. They were glad to be getting the money, because it was hard to come by.

Q. You say your CCC training helped you get your job with the forestry service after you got out - do you think it helped you further in other work that you did?

A. When I worked at the lookout tower I did meet people, because they do visit those towers. I had some guy from France high up in the government visiting there. If you'd look at that daily log and diary you'd see interesting people - people really high up and then people maybe wanted for some major crime. I learned to meet people and get along with them, and when I worked for the Shepard Research in California I had to deal with people. I was capable of doing so because of past experience with them. And then of course it helped tremendously in police department work because you have to get along with people there too. I would say beginning with the CCC and building up to that, without the CCC camp I couldn't have taken it step by step to one of these jobs, which were pretty good jobs.

Q. That was quite a jump, from living in Arkansas most of your life and going to someplace like San Francisco, into police work.

A. Yes, after five years I was promoted to sergeant. Some friends of mine were on the police force and talked me into it.....

Q. You were in the Navy?

A. Yes, I was in 31 months. I enlisted at Memphis, Tennessee. I was on a ship, in the Pacific. I did what they call "action" but I was never fired upon. Maybe you have seen what they call a "Higgins" landing boat I was in charge of one of them. We had the one boat which we maintained, then we were in a division we lived in and we had to take our part in the maintenance of the ship in that particular area.

Q. When were you discharged?

A. It was in January or February 1945, at Memphis. I barely made it back to California in time for my wedding.

Q. Was the CCC training helpful to you in the military?

entirely different matter. There were promotions in the CCC. They didn't have to move somebody else out to move you in to get you a job, they could move you up. Most of the guys would have liked to have that extra \$6. It was a \$9 raise next.

Q. When you left the Navy you settled in California?

A. Yes, I then went to work for the Sherman Research, worked for them 9 years.

Q. What is your opinion of the CCC and its contribution to the youth and to the nation's economy?

A. I don't know what it did for the economy, because I wasn't interested in that particular thing at that time. I think it helped us to learn to live together, we learned a little bit about discipline, and the rewards for doing what you should do. I think it made better men out of a lot of us. I could have ended up being gunned down or electrocuted, I don't know what would have happened to me.

Q. Did you have friends in the CCC that you would meet later in life?

A. Yes, I met a man by the name of Bullock-I had hope to run across him here today. I went to the Navy, and the forestry service and to California and working at Sherman Research, I don't know how long I'd been there but it must have been over a year because I had a credit card, and they wouldn't give you a credit card if you didn't have at least a year. But I stopped at a Sherman service station, and this guy looked so familiar to me, and I asked him what his name was and he said, you beat me to it, I was going to ask you, and I found out his name was Bullock and we had been in the CCC camp together. And I've met a few of them since then. There's one that lives in San Diego, Johnny Shoewiler, from Paris, Arkansas, I think he owns a machine shop.

Q. Do you know any at the reunion today?

A. I've met two so far. There's Adrian Williams, I was in camp with him, and the assistant educational director, I don't remember his name. There are some more floating around but I haven't met up with them yet.

Q. I understand congress has recently passed a bill to reinstitute the CCC. How do you feel about this, what do you see as its possible contribution to society in the 80's?

A. There's an age where they don't want to go to school and don't have to, and they're not old enough to get a job, their employer can't rely on them, this is the unemployment age, and these kids create a lot of problems due to not being occupied with something constructive. They're the ones who pull the burglaries and rapes and real serious malicious acts. I'm not kicking kids in the teeth because I have two wonderful children. But if they'd have something to do like the CCC it would help. They have CCC camps in California now. They're doing a wonderful job, where there's a flood, they get into water up to their necks. And they sent some of them up to Washington when that mountain erupted. When you talk to these kids you get the impression you're talking to somebody who is pretty well satisfied. I think it would be money well spent. They can spend that same amount of money to build prisons and hire men to guard them.

Q. I've asked you a lot of questions about your experience with the CCC, is there anything I've not asked you that you feel is important?

A. Not only were the men in the army responsible for teaching us responsibility, but the men in the forestry service did too, they were good men and did their jobs well. I think if they hired the caliber of people now that they did then it would do the kids a lot of good, and do the country a lot of good. There's access to these mountains around here where they went in and put those fires out, where all they could have done was set and let them burn if the CCC hadn't built those fire trails in there.