

Interview
with
CLINTON HARRIS DEAN

October 1, 1995

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Shenandoah National Park
Luray, Virginia

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Side A:

Clinton Dean is a former Civilian Conservation Corps enrollee stationed in Shenandoah National Park from 1937 to 1939. Dean is a native of Greene County, Virginia, just outside the park boundary near the dividing line of the Central and South Districts. The interview begins with Dean recalling his joining the CCC at age 16. He arrived at the Park during the wintertime and was stationed at Camp NP-3, Company 1387, Baldface, at South River. He describes the routine of a normal day. Dean worked primarily cutting dead chestnut trees, but also built fire trail, fought forest fires, did road embankment work, drove a dump truck and trained for fire tower duty.

Dean discusses discipline in the camp, and a few incidents of problems. He then talks in general about food, laundry, uniforms, living in barracks and religious services. He relates his experiences working in severe winter weather. He recalls educational classes available. Dean used weekend "liberty" time to go home, often walking the six miles. He recalls in particular Mr. Graham, a recreation leader who impressed Dean with his level of fitness. Dean gives his impressions of the mountain families, most of whom had been moved off the mountain by this time. He briefly discussed wildlife and vegetation, then returns to talk about the winters on the mountain.

Dean voices his opinion of moving the former residents off the mountain to make way for the Park. He then talks about recreation in the CCC, particularly the boxing he was involved in. Dean remembers that there were traveling entertainers who would visit the CCC camps and relates an exhibition put on by "Captain Bob Anderson, the Strongest Little Man in the World." After talking about his life after he left the CCC, Dean reiterates his fondness for his CCC days, wishing something like it was available to young people today.

End of interview.

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START SIDE A

Joy Stiles: This will be an oral history, conducted on Sunday, October 1, 1995, in the Byrd Visitor Center in Shenandoah National Park.

Ken Steeber: This is a Shenandoah National Park oral history interview. It's October 1, 1995 and we are at Byrd Visitor Center in Shenandoah National Park. I'm Ken Steeber, Park Volunteer, and I'm interviewing Clinton Dean, former Civilian Conservation Corps enrollee. Clinton served from 1937 to 1939. History records the policies and purposes of the CCC, but little has been preserved of the human effort that cemented it together. Much of the human history of the CCC exists in the memories of those who served. The Shenandoah National Park Archives is preserving these memories through a series of oral history interviews with former CCC recruits.

Clinton, I want to thank you for sharing your CCC experience with us. I have some questions I'd like to ask that will shed light about your life here in the CCC. Your full name?

Clinton Dean: Clinton Harris Dean.

KS: Clinton, when were you born?

CD: 1921, September the 27.

KS: Where were you living when you signed up for the CCC?

CD: Just out of the Park boundary, here, on Route 33.

KS: Is that in Page County?

CD: No, Greene County.

KS: Greene County. Now, who were you living with at that time? Parents, spouse . . .

CD: Family.

KS: You were living with family?

CD: Family Dean.

KS: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

CD: One brother, and one sister.

KS: How did you find out about the CCC?

CD: I had a friend that joined the year before. This judge decided I should join them, too

...

KS: I see.

CD: Because I was a little unruly.

KS: Oh, got in a little trouble.

CD: Yeah. And he suggested that I didn't come before him within a two year period. So he suggested a two [laughter] . . . two years in the CCC!

KS: I understand! Okay, now, uh, what year was it that you joined? That was, I take it, was 1937?

CD: 1937.

KS: What month was that?

CD: I think maybe January, I know it was wintertime.

KS: January? In the winter time?

CD: Yeah.

KS: Okay. And how old were you at the time?

CD: 16.

KS: What was the last year of school that you attended?

CD: Sixth grade.

KS: Sixth grade. Now, you say 16, did you have to fudge your age to get in? A lot of boys did that, didn't they?

[Dean nods head affirmatively]

KS: Clinton nods yes.

CD: Yes.

KS: Okay. Camp life, let me ask you a little bit about your camp life. And what camp were you assigned to?

CD: Camp 3.

KS: Camp 3. And that was in the Southern District, near . . .

CD: South River Picnic Ground. This side of South River Picnic Ground.

KS: Was it at the picnic ground site?

CD: No.

KS: Where it is today?

CD: No, there's a company street there today.

KS: Oh, okay.

CD: Yeah. Pavement still there, look good. Looks good.

KS: You're going to have to show me that. Alright, tell me about the, your daily camp routine, like, you know, like when reveille was, and . . .

CD: Well, we had breakfast, oh, I think it was around 6 o'clock, well as I can remember, 6 or 6:30. From there, we went into the woods, to cut dead chestnut trees, (). Well, we had fire trails some days, we built fire trails, but mostly it was the chestnut trees they were concentrating on. Saw them down, saw them in two place if they landed on another chestnut tree.

KS: Now, the two years you were there, did you just do lumber work on the trees, or was there other duties that you did?

CD: We planted, we planted shrubbery, you know, and . . . fighting forest fires.

KS: Did you have a lot of fires in those days?

CD: Yeah, we had some.

KS: Quite a bit. How about grading the roadside, did you do that?

CD: Yes, did that.

KS: Planted trees? Erosion control? Did you do erosion control?

CD: Right, right.

KS: Okay. Were you trained for any of the job specialties while you were here?

CD: No, nothing special.

KS: Okay. What kind of tools did they, did you have to work with?

CD: Pick and shovel.

KS: Mostly pick and shovel.

CD: Cross cut saw. Yup. I drove a truck the last year, I think the last year.

KS: What were your duties driving the truck? Did--

CD: Dump truck.

KS: Dump truck.

CD: Yeah.

KS: And what were you hauling most of the time?

CD: Dirt, rocks . . .

KS: Fill dirt?

CD: () sometimes. Shrubbery. You know, dig it up, and slide it up on the back of a truck and haul it to the site to where you'd replant it.

KS: Oh, I see. How would you rate the quality of work that was performed by the CCC?

CD: Oh, I think they did some wonderful work. Wonderful work.

KS: Do you think it was of high quality?

CD: I think it was, I think at that time that we did better work than the WPA! [laughter]

KS: How would you rate the supervision that you received?

CD: Oh, well, yeah, I think we had some good supervisors, yup.

KS: They were civilians, weren't they?

CD: They were civilians, yup.

KS: Were they local men?

CD: Yes, local men.

KS: And how about the job assignments: were they well planned? I mean . . .

CD: Yes, yes.

KS: . . . did you really know what you had to do and go out and do it?

CD: Yeah, right.

KS: They were all planned well. Okay, I want to get back a little bit to camp life. Were there many disciplinary problems in camp?

CD: We had some problems with the fellows from Pennsylvania when they moved in.

KS: Were they minor problems? Or . . .

CD: Yeah--

KS: How would you rate them?

CD: --a few fights.

KS: A few fights?

CD: They tried to take over their camp. We had a Virginia camp there, and they moved a lot of boys in from Pennsylvania. You know, and one guy was . . . think he's () the best, you know, and the other guy thinks you're wrong, he thinks you're wrong.

KS: And it winds up to be a scrape.

CD: Yeah, and you had to settle it! [laughs]

KS: Now, of course there wasn't always discipline problems--

CD: No, no, no.

KS: Would you say that was an exception?

CD: Umm-hmm. Right.

KS: How about discipline? How was it handled? Who handled the disciplinary?

CD: Well, the captain.

KS: Right.

CD: He handled most of that.

KS: What was some of the punishment that would be handed out for infractions of rules?

CD: Oh, like KP for a week, or you'd clean the--what they call the grease pit.

KS: Would that be just like the Army?

CD: Yeah, same thing. I think it taught me a lot of discipline, for the Army and for my time in the Merchant Marines after, oh yeah.

KS: Oh, yeah.

CD: I'm sure.

KS: Now, how about the food that you had? Who prepared it?

CD: Well, we had cooks that had experience in restaurant work.

KS: Were they civilians or were they enrollees?

CD: No, they were enrollees.

KS: They were enrollees. How did you like the food?

CD: I loved it.

KS: First rate?

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: Okay. How about your laundry? Now, I'm a little bit confused how laundry was handled.

CD: Well, we had a laundry truck. I guess they did the laundry down in Elkton.

KS: You sent your personal laundry out?

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: Okay. Were you required--I would imagine, how often did you wear like a fatigue outfit? Was that, what were your issue of clothing? Do you remember?

CD: Well, I think you had about three pair of fatigues and two sets of class A uniforms.

Well, khakis, too, in summertime, you know, in the summer, but OD's in the winter. Similar to the Army. We had--

KS: Did you have to fall out for inspection? Like the Army also?

CD: Oh, yeah.

KS: Same thing, okay.

CD: Retreat, and so forth.

KS: How were the barracks heated in the winter time?

CD: We had wood.

KS: Woodstoves?

CD: Yeah, I remember. One guy was designated to, you know, to keep the fire going.

Travel through the barracks and kept the fires.

KS: How about rivalries? Were there any rivalries between the camps, you know, friendly, bantering around, and stuff like that?

CD: Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah! Yeah, long ball games, you know, and stuff like that.

KS: But no major problems developed from that?

CD: No, no.

KS: Okay.

CD: And no trouble with the small towns, you know, like being unruly and all. Most of the guys were pretty nice when they went downtown. I can't remember one of my buddies being locked up, down in Elkton.

KS: How about religious services? Were they offered to you?

CD: Yes, umm hmm. We had a chaplain.

KS: Was it a military chaplain?

CD: Well, he, yeah, he had a uniform.

KS: Okay. What was some of the hardships that you had in camp, aside from being away

from home?

CD: Well, I guess [laughs] that weather, you know, I mean, out in it in 15--I remember 15 degrees below zero. Out in the--well, if you got real cold, it was permitted to go back to the fire. We had a big campfire, always in the woods.

KS: While you were working?

CD: Yeah.

KS: Oh, I see.

CD: And you could take a five minute break to warm up a little bit.

KS: Oh, I see.

CD: Around the fire, before you go back to the sawing.

KS: Did every work group have a fire, during the winter so that he could keep warm?

CD: Yeah, I think they did.

KS: How did you eat when you were out on work projects?

CD: Just like the Army. You had mess kits--

KS: They brought them out?

CD: --you had your water canteen and everything.

KS: The trucks bring hot meals out to you?

CD: Yeah, trucks brought the hot meal out and you had your canteen with you at all times and your water, your mess kit.

KS: Now, how about educational classes, did you attend any while you were here in the CCC?

CD: Yes, they had some educational class. We had a, well, we had a guy we call, we call him "Beat Him Up", he's the educational advisor. He was a good boxer and I took some boxing lessons from him. He had different classes for woodcraft and stuff like that.

KS: Okay. What educational classes did you attend while you were here?

CD: Nothing with books. Mostly it was just craft work.

KS: All right, they offered, like, see, they offered like first aid and . . .

CD: Yeah, oh, yeah--

KS: --you know, things like that.

CD: I took the first aid and the advance course in first aid.

KS: Oh, I see. Okay. How about medical services, were they available to you?

CD: Yes, I never remember getting sick, but [laughs] --

KS: But they had services--

CD: But they had it, yes.

KS: And dental work, too?

CD: Umm hmm, yeah.

KS: Now, what part of camp life did you enjoy the most?

CD: I guess liberty, you going on down on liberty, I guess, to the town.

KS: How often did you get home?

CD: Well, I walked home every weekend. If I didn't go to town on the truck, I would walk home.

KS: About how far was home from your camp?

CD: Well, let's see, it's three miles from Skyline Drive, I'm not sure how far it is back here [referring to Byrd Visitor Center]. What is it, twenty-six miles or . . .

KS: Yeah, roughly.

CD: Roughly, roughly. I'd say three miles from the top, from Spottswood . . .

KS: The trail.

CD: Called Spottswood Trail. 33 [referring to Rt. 33] and 3 down, that's six mile. Short walk. [laughs]

KS: Now, you told us that your first job was really just clearing the dead chestnuts, and

everything else.

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: Other than that, what other jobs did you perform?

CD: I drove a truck.

KS: Right.

CD: I was in training, when, at the last, for that fire station on Hightop Mountain. There was, they had a fire tower up there. Built of wood, yup, and two guys in it, two days a piece.

KS: And you were trained, trained for that?

CD: I was in training then, but I--

KS: Oh, I see. And then what would your job up there be, just to spot fires?

CD: Spot fires and call in.

KS: Call in. What were your first impressions of the Park? Of course you were a local, and you knew about it, but when you first got up into camp, what were your first impressions?

CD: Well, it was something new. Wearing a uniform, and obeying all the laws! [laughs hard]

KS: Yeah, that's the hardest part.

CD: Yeah.

KS: How about people that you met while you were in camp. Is there two people that stand out, or more that stand out in your mind? That you really liked or impressed you quite a bit?

CD: Yeah, I guess. Our father figure was, uh . . . his first name . . . I know his last name was Graham. Uh, Mr. Graham, we used to call him. He took everybody under his wing. And he'd teach you a lesson, too, when you got mitts on with him [laughs] He was good. He'd go three rounds, he'd allow you three rounds, and then he'd take on about six guys, three rounds each. And after he took on the six guys, he'd go through his exercises, for about a half an hour.

KS: You mean he boxed three rounds with six guys?

CD: Six guys! And then he would--at least a half an hour, exercise. On the floor, and he would bend, and push-ups, and everything.

KS: Was he a young man?

CD: No! He would--bald head! I don't know how old he was, but I figured, today, he was at least forty. Forty. Wasn't an old man, but he was in good shape. Oh--

KS: Now, what was he, a foreman?

CD: No, just recreation.

KS: Oh, recreation.

CD: Just recreation.

KS: Was he military, or civilian?

CD: Well, no, he had a uniform on. He had--I don't know what rank he carried, whether it was captain, or what, but he had a uniform on.

KS: Were you required to do much physical education? I mean, exercising--

CD: Oh, we're exercising! Oh, I always had my run every morning, you know, circle the camp.

KS: Now, was that with the group, or you did that personally?

CD: No, I did that personally, yeah--

KS: Yeah, but how about group exercise? Did they have group exercises?

CD: Yes, we had that.

KS: Was that every morning?

CD: Every, every morning, every morning, calisthenics.

KS: Before work?

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: Okay, I see. Here's an area I want to get into with you that I'm interested in. Your family, did they lose their home to the Park?

CD: No.

KS: Okay. Then what I'd like to know is what were your impressions of the mountain families that you met?

CD: Oh, well, I grew up--

KS: I guess some of them were your relatives.

CD: Yeah. Sure. I grew up right in the mountains. You see, I'm, that's only a short distance off of the top there. I'm on top of the, what we call the Little Mountain, that's the first mountain leaving Stanardsville, when you top that, my home's there. And then I have three miles to the top of the Skyline Drive. Where I meet the Skyline Drive.

KS: I don't know if this is even a fair question, but what was your contact with some of the mountain families around the camp? Do you remember any of them?

CD: No, just in camp.

KS: Just in camp?

CD: Yeah.

KS: Okay. And basically, how were the boys treated by the mountain families, especially boys who didn't live in the area?

CD: Oh, I, uh, they always answered questions for the guys. You know, Pennsylvania guys would love to ask questions about the mountains. Like they ask us questions about the mountains, you know. I got along with everybody.

KS: Some of the boys told me that they would be invited to dinner sometimes in some of the homes. Was that . . .

CD: I never experienced that. Most of the homes were moved out, around Camp 3, (). Moved off the mountain, settled down on both side.

KS: What do you remember about the animals that were in the Park when you came in?

CD: Very few deer and bear.

KS: Very few.

CD: Hardly any deer.

KS: Any other animals that you would think that were abundant, like rabbits, or ...

CD: Rabbits and--

KS: Squirrels?

CD: Squirrels

KS: The smaller game animals.

CD: Fox, and groundhogs . . . snakes, a lot of rattlers [laughs]. We killed a lot of rattlers.

KS: One of the things that we're trying to get an image of is, they say that during this particular time, that the Park was really bare, you know, voided of trees. How do you rate it? Was it really bare or . . .? Now, we're talking about the Southern District, now. Was there a lot of growth of trees, and . . .

CD: Yeah, a lot of trees through here.

KS: All through the Southern District.

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: How does that compare with the northern districts, were they kind of open fields? There was a lot of grazing going on and a lot of dead trees and things and you would think that there was a lot of open space.

CD: Well, there was a lot of fields still open from the farmers that had been there before, and worked it by hand. They dug all the trees, and stumps and everything up by hand. I remember a stump puller, they call it. You used leverage on it, a long pole on the end of some steel and you had to pull. Pulling out the stump.

KS: I see.

CD: Some of the old farmers pulling them up.

KS: Was there any farming going on when you arrived in camp?

CD: Not around Camp 3.

KS: They were gone, okay. What was the weather like, you know, the summers compared to the winters?

CD: Oh, the summers were nice, but the winters were rough .

KS: Are they, were they worse than they are today?

CD: Yes. Oh, yeah.

KS: Lot of snow.

CD: Umm hmm, lot of snow.

KS: What kind of depth are we talking about, like six inches or . . .

CD: Oh, twelve inches, to fifteen inches.

KS: And that was commonplace?

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: Okay. How does the Park compare now to what it was when you first got here?

CD: Well, I don't know that I've loved it so much. I don't know, it all looks the same in my eyes, I think. All of the mountains.

KS: Here's a question that is troubling for a lot of people, and it has to do with the relationship of the mountain people to the Park. A lot of people were moved from the Park and there's a certain amount of bitterness that still exists in the communities surrounding the area. How do you feel about--since you're local, how do you feel about the Park and what it impacted?

CD: Well, I think they should have let the people live there the rest of their lives, anyway. I mean, you know, 'cause a lot of them didn't live long after they moved out of the Park. I remember three or four passing on after they were moved out.

KS: Was there a lot of sadness among those people who left?

CD: Yes, definitely.

KS: Okay. Well, let's switch to a lighter subject: recreation. We touched a little bit about

it early in our discussion. But, what recreation opportunities did you have in camp to fill out your free time?

CD: Well, boxing, mostly for me--

KS: Did you box?

CD: Yeah. Some of the guys loved baseball, but I never cared for it like they did. They played different camps, some of the guys joined just to get to () the trips back and forth to camp. I think--

KS: They had basketball, and most of the team sports?

CD: Yes.

KS: Now, you said you were boxing. You were, I take it--what weight class were you?

CD: I was in the hundred to a hundred and ten pound.

KS: The smaller size?

CD: Yeah.

KS: Did you do inter-camp boxing?

CD: Yeah, we had camp boxing.

KS: Okay. Some tough guys?

CD: Yeah. Some pretty tough.

KS: What kind of, when we talk about boxing, what kind of rules did you have? Was it three round?

CD: Three round.

KS: Like the Olympics today?

CD: Yep, right.

KS: Did you wear headgear--

CD: No.

KS: No headgear.

CD: No headgear, no. They didn't have it back then.

KS: And did they have like rings set up, and--

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: Just . . .

CD: Yeah, they'd set up the ring. And then we had guys, oh, like traveling, guys that would put on exhibitions. You would come through . . . I remember one. He was calling himself Captain Bob Anderson, the Strongest Little Man in the World. And he put on a show for us. They'd take a quarter out of our pay, out of each one that signed up for it. And in the recreation room. And I'll tell you about some of the things, some of the tricks he performed. He took a twenty penny nail, you're familiar with nails, wrapped a handkerchief around it. And a two by four and drove that through the two by four into the ping pong table.

KS: With his hand?

CD: Umm hmm. And a handkerchief. And he took what we called an inch and a half rope. He made a loop and put it on ten of the biggest men in camp. They weighed 160 to 200 pound. And tried to strangle him. And he had his wife with him, coaching them to pull steady and he cautioned them if he dropped his hand, to stop pulling. But my cousin was on one end of the rope, and they tried to choke him. He got red in the face, but he didn't drop that hand. And after the pull, he said, "Well, men, I'll show you you're not too strong after all." He tied a double knot in that and put that two by four with the twenty penny spike in it, on over top of the knot, then wrapped that around his hand, his wrist, and started pulling. He must have stood there and () strand after strand, (). Then he threw it out on the ground and said, "Okay, you guys break it." Then he took, he made a saddle, like a bosun's chair, out of the other end of the rope, got the heaviest man--his name was Maxwell Swope (sp?). Put him in that. He weighed 235 pound. Then he put a hanky around the rope and started heaving it around and round. And got it, [laughing] right, standing out straight, you know! And I yelled "Let him go!" He said, "I'll kill you when he gets done, Dean, I'll kill you!"

KS: Did they have many people touring as entertainers, the camps?

CD: Quite a few.

KS: What kind of entertainment did they bring in?

CD: Well, they had some dancers, and not, not girly-girly sort of thing.

KS: Just straight entertainment,

CD: Yes, straight entertainment.

KS: Would you compare it like to the USO, like for the military?

CD: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah. We had a USO traveling around to some of the places. I fought for the USO up Clifton Forge, once, one of the battles up there. They charge, say, you know, quarter to get in to it. That was donated to the guys there.

KS: While you were in the CCC, did you date any local girls?

CD: No, I was a little bashful around girls.

KS: And of course you were quite ().

CD: Yeah. They didn't have enough to go around, anyway, in Elkton.

[laughter]

KS: Okay, now, after you left the CCC, what kind of life did you have? What was your career like?

CD: Well, I moved to DC with an uncle, and worked part time on a moving van. I worked at Brigg's Meat there, until I got in too many parking tickets and trouble with the law. And I moved on to Baltimore and got a job with (). I was helping to build the planes for them when I went in the Army.

KS: You were in the Army?

CD: Umm hmm.

KS: During World War II, I take it?

CD: Yes.

KS: What theater of operations were you in?

CD: I was just in the Air Force ground crew, Air Force.

KS: Were you stateside, or overseas.

CD: Stateside.

KS: Stateside. How would you say the CCC affected your life?

CD: Well, I think it made a, helped to make a man out of me. You know, discipline, and everything. I mean, I knew there was a better life ahead for me. After I left the CCC's, I was looking forward to a lot of traveling, and I got it. My first big city was D.C., on to Baltimore. After I got out of the Army, I went back to Baltimore and then I joined the Merchant Marines.

KS: How long were you in the Merchant Marines?

CD: Twenty years.

KS: And you retired from there, I take it? What did you do after the Merchant Marines?

CD: I, my wife talked me--I'd still be in the Merchant Marines. She passed away thirty years ago, God rest her soul. She talked me out of there because, it'd been thirty years, I guess. But I was buying property all the time in Baltimore and I have some apartment houses in Baltimore.

KS: So you're a property owner and you have apartments that you rent?

CD: Yes, yeah.

KS: Oh, very good.

CD: I have three buildings.

KS: Looking back, what do you think of your CCC experiences?

CD: Wonderful. Wonderful.

KS: Wouldn't trade it for anything?

CD: Nothing. I don't care. Hey, not even for my Army and Merchant Marines life. I loved it.

KS: Most boys say that.

CD: Yeah. Loved it. I wish they had it again for the younger generation. Take a lot of people off the welfare, young people. I know five or six that are on welfare right now in Baltimore, that should be in camp.

KS: Be helpful.

CD: Like CCC's.

KS: Clinton, I want to thank you very much for your interview and for your insight into your life in the camp. Thank you again.

CD: Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW