Clarence W. Johnson
Narrator

Stan Johnson
Interviewer

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Bemidji, Minnesota

Clarence Johnson - CJ
Stan Johnson - SJ

SJ: This is an interview with Clarence W. Johnson, R. R. 4, Bemidji, Minnesota. Mr. Johnson was in the CCC camp at Big Lake, Company 720, and will tell of his recollections during that program at Big Lake. Stan Johnson recording. Tape made May 18, 1976.

We'll start out, Clarence, by asking you where you were born?

CJ: In Austin, Minnesota on October 19, 1909.

SJ: Were you working there before you moved here for the CCC program?

CJ: I was working in the Amory, it was sort of like a WPA job and we were remodeling the Armory at Austin, and it was getting close to the end of that and I had to find work and this CCC deal came along and I went to the courthouse (I think that was where you had to report) and they enrolled me and they let me know in a day or two what to do - I think there were about five or six from Austin that went to the depot and were re-grouped at Fort Snelling and then we stayed there for the night, and the next morning we boarded this train and it was about eleven o'clock in the morning that we arrived in Cass Lake and I remember it was kind of fascinating to a kid, you know, to get out on the depot platform and see these Indians with these big, black, flat hats. And it was a chilly morning and then, of course, they herded us over to a truck - we went north from Cass Lake to the CCC camp there - they got us all out on the road, and they assigned so many to each barracks. Then it's just like being in the Army - you're assigned to bunks. Then you start getting your gear together, start making yourself at home.

SJ: What was your impression of that area, quite a change from an open area to a wooded area?

CJ: Well, yes. I always pictured living out in the woods different than it was around Austin. Mainly because there you're down to nature and I felt I'm going to like this up here - I always did like it outdoors, anyway, and all these pine trees and everything up here. In those days it seemed like if you're 2-300 miles away from home you're halfways across the world. But we all seemed to take to it real well...

SJ: Do you remember the date you arrived?
CJ: It could have been around the 6th of February, or pretty close to it.

SJ: What was your camp name and number?

CJ: Well, it was camp 720. They had camp S28 and then Company 720, and then we were introduced to Captain Hammer. I always remarked about him; he was such a jolly fellow - had a big round face - and I thought to myself well I'm going to like it here and anybody who is as jolly as that you can usually have a pretty good time.

SJ: Were you located on the north end of Big Lake?

CJ: No, I believe it's the south end of Big Lake, it is approximately a half mile from Big Lake. It was on the crossroads I believe it's County Road 12. I believe it's #8 that comes up from Cass Lake.

SJ: Near that Town Hall?

CJ: That Town Hall is located there now. There used to be a cabin there and a Forester by the name of Al Oakes used to occupy that. A little cabin across from the Army Headquarters building.

SJ: Do you remember the buildings they had there, can you describe any of them?

CJ: The buildings at the camp - let's see, we had about six barracks. We had a Rec Hall, supply office, and of course the latrine and the shower room. Then we had the lunch hall, and then above that we always called it up on the hill, that was the Forestry, we called it the Forestry shack and when you came into that it was like a huge living room with these forester's bunks around there. I think there were four of them that occupied that, and then the other end of the building was their office. Then across the driveway from there were two garages; one for maintenance. Every Saturday we had to bring the trucks in and work on them - and between there and the Forestry shack was a tool house. It was pretty good sized. In the morning we would go out and we had to sign for the tools issued out, so many axes, so many carryalls, it depended on what project we were on for the day. And sometimes they'd have maybe dynamite caps if we were on a road building job where we had to dynamite stumps and get our water cans and always see that they were filled with water.

SJ: Who operated the camp - we heard the Army was involved.

CJ: You mean the head of the Amy?

SJ: Yes. What were the functions of the Amy versus the Forest Service? We heard both organizations were in there.

CJ: Well, I think under the CCC ruling, I don't know exactly what the real function was. I know we always remarked that when you're in camp you're in the Army and when you're out in the woods you're with the Forestry. But I think the whole setup of this deal was to keep the men under like an Army regulation to keep them under control. I'm just sort of guessing at this, because I've never been into this before. My assumption is that's what it would be. To keep the
men sort of under control; you get a bunch of young men that way, especially when they're in town - to keep discipline over them.

SJ: Did the Forest Service assign work for the men each morning?

CJ: Yes, all the crews that went out were assigned to the Forestry and then whatever project we were on, such as maybe Al Oakes would be assigned to one crew, he was experienced on whatever they were doing, and he was actually like a supervisor of the Forest when we were out in the forest working. And then like we had another one that was more experienced in road building or something like that, why he would go with us, whichever crew he was assigned to.

SJ: What kind of hours did you have in those days?

CJ: I think we went out in the woods about eight o'clock in the morning and I think we left the woods about 4, and sometimes they would allow us a little leeway if we were pretty far away from camp, we would leave maybe a half hour earlier to at least get back to camp by 4:30 or so, so the fellows could get washed up and get ready for dinner.

SJ: Five days a week?

CJ: Yes, and Saturday, now we come back to the Army - you had to have your inspections and barracks cleaned, and you had your early morning inspection then by the Army. So that part was, you had to get your barracks scrubbed out, and have your bunks and everything really policed up and that was your Saturday job.

SJ: Did you have doctors in camp?

CJ: Oh yes, we had a doctor and I think two corpsmen. They weren't called that at that time I don't think, but they were his assistants anyway. And they had about ten beds like a little hospital or sick bay is what we called it. I know I was in there one time with poison oak. I had poison oak on both legs and they put hot packs on me and I know the next morning I had pimples on me - looked like new flesh coming out with pus underneath them all. I was in there for about 3-4 days.

SJ: Do you remember some of the work you were assigned?

CJ: Yes. When it was hot and the fire hazard was there, there were always say 100 men who would be kept in camp especially for fire call. One summer we went out on quite a few calls. I know one time we were out, it was north of Pennington and was a pretty big grass fire - it ran and it got into this Tamarack swamp. It really gave us a fit then because it got into a peat bog and we had to dig down to the ground to get that out. I was out with a crew one time almost three days running, we didn't get back to camp.

SJ: Do you remember the kind of tools you were using for fighting fire?

CJ: We used the pump tank that you put on your back, it was about a 5-gallon pump can. Had a hand pump on it. And of course the shovels for patrolling the fire lines and we had sand points we used to drive down for water to run down little hoses where we could use them.
SJ: You also did some tree planting?

CJ: Oh yes, then in the fall - when it came around the last of September until freezing we would get out in the woods and we had, of course prior to that we scalped (as they called it) different areas. We were assigned to a spot that belonged to the government that they wanted trees planted - we scalped that first with a sort of maddox - looked like a bent shovel with an axe handle on it and we would go along and scalp every six feet. The rows were six feet apart and six foot spacing.

SJ: That was removing the sod?

CJ: Yes, removing the sod for planting trees. Of course, that you could do in the summer time but then in the fall we would go back to those places and we would plant those trees in those scalped places because the proper spacing for the trees was supposed to have been 6 x 6 and then of course after that was over, say when the snows came, why then we had dead wood stacked along the roadside where we used to go in and burn brush.

SJ: Have you seen any of the trees you planted 40 years ago?

CJ: No, I'd like to go up there sometime but I just don't know how to locate it. It would be real interesting to know how they turned out but I just don't know where it would be because you come back 40 years later, why the area is all new to you and there are different highways in there like you wouldn't even know where to go.

SJ: Did you have any equipment other than trucks?

CJ: Yes. This one year that I was in charge of the fire trails I had a 75-cat with a huge grader on it and we had a bulldozer, and we had four trucks I think. We used to grade the road, then wherever there was a fill we would use the trucks to haul dirt in there and make fills. A crew went ahead to chop the smaller trees down for the fire trails, and we made some pretty good roads back in that area.

SJ: Were you able to work in the winter when it got pretty cold?

CJ: Oh yes, that's why I say we went out and burned brush in the wintertime, mostly. You couldn't do road work - they had a project they called roadside cleanup. We would pace back from the road 100 feet and we took all the dead stuff out so the tourists going through couldn't see the dead wood in the woods, and that's what we would pile in the summertime and then in the wintertime we would go out there and burn that. It was practically all winter that we did burn jobs. And then another winter job I had was on Lake Kitchi and Moose Lake, and I think Rice Lake, three or four lakes in there that I did lake survey work on. Then I had to draw in the shoreline and check it with the maps that they had in camp - if the shore had changed any. They had lineal survey lines across the lake and they had stakes in the ice I think it was every two chains - and then we'd get a sounding there by chopping a hole in the ice and dropping a bucket. We had a bucket made like a huge tomato juice can and one-half of it was filled with lead and the other half was empty; they had a little lever across the top that had a spring on it. We'd drop that down with a rope that had a red mark every five feet and I had to get the depth of the lake and when that bucket would hit bottom it would trip and it was shut to pick up a sample of the
bottom. So what we were actually looking for was vegetation to see if there was enough vegetation in this area to take care of the fish in the lake. And then I'd get a bearing on something on land and I'd strike off that way on a straight line and every two chains we'd dig another hole, then get another sounding and I had this tatum with marked paper on it and I'd draw in the shoreline and some days it was pretty chilly out there, if it got below zero a little bit the wind started blowing, it was a chilly job.

SJ: Did you do this on several lakes in the camp area?

CJ: Yes, I think it was about five lakes that I actually worked on - Kitchi Lake and I think Rice Lake and Moose Lake, and I think there was Upper Rice Lake.

SJ: Any problems in cold weather, people freezing their hands?

CJ: Oh no. Well, one time I had a crew out - we were making snow-fence out of Norway pine boughs and one of the young fellows' nose started to get white and I made him grab a handful of snow and start massaging his nose and that brought him around and I told him go over to the truck out of the wind a little bit and I told him to get up in the truck and get out of the wind for a little while.

SJ: Was the clothing you received adequate?

CJ: The clothing was perfect for this area - course it was designed I guess like all these old lumber jacks around here always wore these packs with the felt liners in them and good heavy wool socks. And the main thing to remember in the cold is always to have everything you put on your feet good and dry. I remember a lot of times I would have to pair of heavy wool socks on and two layers of felt lining in my pack. So I always made sure when I got packs that I got at least a full size bigger than what I actually took. That was the main thing.

SJ: Some of these fellows were new to this part of the country, in using these tools, were there any problems?

CJ: Well, yes, most of the kids had never used an axe - I remember one instance we were at north of Pennington and I had a crew and we were cutting a trail and this one kid took an axe - a double bitted axe - and there was a pile of wood and it had a little snow on it and it was frozen and he took a wild swing at it and the log he hit was nothing but an old rotten thing and it was icy and his axe glanced off and hit him right on the front of his foot. Between his toes and his ankle. He buried that axe right into his foot.

SJ: Went right through the boot?

CJ: Yes. And I took him (he fainted) and I laid him on some logs there that didn't have any snow and I stretched him out on that and I had these old fashioned Army tin packs with dressing in them - I opened one of them up - they looked like a book - you open it up and had gauze in it and I wrapped that around his foot I pressed two of them on the cut. I cut his boot off so it wouldn't hurt his foot and his sock we just cut it open and I had some new recruits out there and we had these slipover dungaree jackets and I told tt.ro of the young recruits to take their jackets off - I wanted to make a stretcher out of them. In fact, I think we took three of them. I had two
other guys go out and get two poles, I said get something about ten feet long. So I strapped those jackets over those two poles and we laid him on and we started to take him towards the road, the truck had just left and I ran one guy out to the main road to get somebody to come back in the woods. Just by luck a truck from another camp came along there and they stopped and picked him up and took him back into camp and we were nine miles from camp. And I remember the doctor told me, or he told the guy who brought him in, tell Johnson that he did a good job on that guy. If he hadn't wrapped it and put the tourniquet on like he did he would have bled to death before he got into camp.

SJ: Did you have first aid kits there?

CJ: Oh yes, the leaders all had first aid kits, but they were old army style. See they were packed in tins, like a sardine can. It had an opener - you'd take and turn it over with this turnkey like thing. And then we had huge rolls of gauze, maybe about the size of - well it was three inches around. They were done up in a roll then in those days it was paper with wax on them. And you break that open, it was as sanitary as you could get out in the woods.

SJ: Did you get different grades as you progressed through?

CJ: No, only when an assistant leader or leader's job came along and that was determined on the amount of men in camp. Now they were allowed so many leaders per working men, and like me I was assigned assistant leader and then about a month later the camp personnel went down - I went back down to a workman again. But I was still doing assistant leader work, but I wasn't getting the pay for it.

SJ: Do you remember the wages they paid?

CJ: Yes, the wages for a working man were $30 a month and, of course, your grub and your clothing, your doctor's care and all that, and then the assistant leader got $36 a month and a leader got $45. That was the highest.

SJ: Was part of this sent home?

CJ: Yes, I think a $30 man got $5 up here, $25 sent home. And I believe an assistant leader got $11 here in camp and $25 sent home. And a leader got $15 here and the rest was sent home.

SJ: Did you work in the Cass Lake area as well as up around Big Lake?

CJ: Well, yes, one summer I took a crew over to Cass Lake Nursery and we spent the whole summer there, we were actually like gardening, weeding the little pine trees which were in rows. Well, they were about 100 foot rows and they had built up siding on each side and they had screens over them. And then we would uncover them and weed them, I think it was some kind of screen to keep the sharp sun away from the small seedlings. Then in the fall, another job that came was picking pine cones. I had a crew out and we'd pick pine cones, not out of the tree itself but we had an area where there was a lot of Norway boughs and branches lying all over the area there, it must have been 80 acres of them. And we actually just picked them, stand right on the ground and pick them right off those boughs.. And then they were sent to Cass Lake, they would extract the seeds from the cones - they had boxes with electric light bulbs in them to produce the
heat, to open the cones for the seeds to fall out, and they had little pans underneath to catch the seed. And I remember it was so fascinating to me - I saw a huge (about 20-30 gallon) G.I. can with jack pine seeds in it one time and it reminded me of flax seed.

SJ: A very small seed?

Yes. Another thing that was fascinating, if you ever see one drop out of a tree it has like a little feather fin on it and it would swirl as it comes to the ground. Then in the spring of the year we would go back to the roadside cleanup again - sometimes there was pretty much snow on the ground, yet, and when it started thawing we used to get pretty wet.

SJ: Do you think this work helped these fellows from other parts of the country?

CJ: Oh yes. What I always thought about it - it kept the kids off the streets and it kept them out of mischief and I read in the paper one time where a detective had said that the CCC camps cut down crime by 45%. It kept the kids off the streets and it kept them occupied and it gave them a little money and it helped their families out. The ones that were picked first, I guess, were the needy families, it gave the kids something to do and it helped the country and I think it was money well spent. And it gives the kids away from home a chance to learn a little different and the ones that already know how to conduct themselves, course they were the ones that were picked as leaders, and they kind of teach these other kids how to grow up and have a little authority, and how to conduct themselves and try to keep them straight. I always felt like I was a sort of father to my group.

SJ: I'd like to ask you a question about one of the buildings. The barracks was an important building - you were in there a lot of the time and I'm wondering if you recall about the equipment and just what you had in there?

CJ: Well, the size of the barracks was about 130 feet long and at first they had wooden bunks, just a box, 2 x 4 legs, with a double-decker, just a little thin mattress about 3 inches thick on it. And then for wintertime we had these barrel stoves - there were three of them in the barracks and in the back end of the barracks there was a room approximately 20 probably by 30 feet and they had closets built back there for kids that had excess clothing like your clothing you wore into town – we didn't always have to wear our army gear into town. Course a lot of them didn't have anything else so they would. That's about all there was in the barracks.

SJ: Was someone assigned to keeping the stove running?

CJ: Oh yes. Well, in the wintertime they'd have like special duties; fellows were assigned each day to take care of the stoves and then at night of course they had a fire watch and he was up all night long and his duty was to make a trip every hour around the whole camp and go through the barracks and put wood into the stoves if they needed it. And so they kept fire all night long. I know one morning we woke up and we could see frost on the nailheads up above and we knew it was pretty cold outside, and went to look at the thermometer - it was 56 below. And we got to thinking, oh boy, we won't go out in the woods today. And then there was another experience we had there one winter, we had our barracks of course was labeled barracks B, or B barracks, and we got scarlet fever. Of course we were quarantined - no town, nobody got out nowhere, nobody was supposed to actually go in the one quarantined barracks, but they did - we weren't
even allowed to go up to the Rec Hall; if we were caught up there we'd be run back. But I know when it was all over, the doctor came by one morning and said, “All right, this is Sunday morning, we're going to quarantine this thing and when I do it, let the fires go down low, and then everybody get in bed and open up all these windows, and leave them open for a half hour and that'll kill any germ left in here.” So we were going to make sure they were going to be killed, so we left them open for one hour and then after that, of course, we closed the windows and perked up the fires. At the Rec Hall we had two ping-pong tables and of course the canteen was open at night to buy candy bars and what not. We didn't have any canned drinks or anything - I don't think they had any drinks up there, just candy and necessary things like envelopes or writing paper. They had a bulletin board that anything new that happened around the camp was always posted there.

SJ: Did they take you to town on weekends at all?

CJ: Yes, sometimes there would be about two trucks assigned to go into Bemidji, oh, about four o'clock in the afternoon and they'd say now the trucks will leave let's say at ten o'clock tonight back to camp. And if you weren't there, you would either walk home or stay in town all night. Then on Sundays they'd go in again; sometimes on special occasions they would go in and take a group in to church if they wanted to, in Bemidji. And then in the afternoon they would go in maybe at four o'clock and sometimes there would be a one o'clock bus, some of them wanted to go in to a movie or something.

SJ: Were you required to stay the entire year or two years?

CJ: I think when we signed up at first, we signed up for three years I believe it was. Then after that, if you came to the end of your time you could sign up again for another year.

SJ: You had mentioned you were there from about'34 to'36 - the camp closed, was that your reason for leaving?

CJ: No, the reason I left was because I had a job. You had to have a job in order to get out of camp. My sister wrote me and said something about there was a job available in Orlando, Florida. Somebody had written her and said that if I came down there they would see that I got a job. So I presented this letter to the captain and he immediately started procedures to get me discharged. That was the only way you could get out, was to have a promise of a job on the outside. Otherwise you stayed in camp until - I don't think there was anything about a year either - you would just stay in there I think it ran for three years but if you had a promise of a job in less time than that you could get out. And then I know the first three-year enlistment that came around and then a lot of them signed up again, I know there was one time when some of the leaders were even supposed to leave, but they worked some way out of that they could stay on longer, because they were kind of valuable men and it's hard to break in new leaders and these fellows had all done such a good job. Another reason, I think, too, we had a pretty good baseball team. 720 I think ran the district championship that year. They had a fellow there called Doc Appids almost anyone around Bemidji or Nymore would remember him because he was a terrific hitter and he's a pretty good pitcher. Another thing, too, this baseball team played other camps - they had just like a World Series of today. At the end of the year tae champions would get together and fight it out. And 720 came up that year with the championship.
SJ: Were there any particular problems during those years at camp that you can recall?

CJ: Well, no, I always got along all right. I changed jobs when I was in, like there was an opening at the Forestry for I just don't know what title it would be, but what I would do - say if a forester would be assigned to go out and check a couple of 40-acre pieces that the government had just purchased, the forester and I would go out there and check it for saw logs. We'd find the 40-acre piece first and if there was a lot of snow we always had snowshoes, and we'd get out to the place with them. We'd take our lunch and we'd check the saw logs on this particular 40. Then when we'd get into camp I would just take all the forester's field hooks and block them in for them for the new 40-acre pieces that we had just checked. So they would be up to date on what the government owned in the Forestry. And I know we would take our lunch and then when noon came we would always build a little fire and sit there and watch the little chickadees come up and sometimes they'd get tame enough to almost land on your shoulder looking for a handout. We'd pinch off some crumbs and hold them out - they'd pick them and take them to a tree and they wouldn't eat them immediately; they'd keep pumping us and see how much they could get from us and then when they couldn't get any more then they'd sit back and eat them.

SJ: Did some of the enrollees, after being discharged, relocate back up in the area?

CJ: Well, that I don't know. Once they got out we never heard from them anymore. Very few of them ever wrote back. When I left I went to Florida and there were a couple of fellows I was chumming with here and one of them had an aunt living in town here in Bemidji - we used to stay there - I wrote letters back to them.

SJ: Did you ever see the camp after you left, before it was torn down?

CJ: No, when we moved from Big Lake over to Wilton I never saw that camp again, the one at Big Lake. I believe there were new barracks being built over at Wilton and then, when I left there I was never back in here until about '72 when I came back up here.

SJ: Was the camp moved to Wilton?

CJ: Yes, the whole camp moved to Wilton. Forestry and all.

SJ: About the time you left in 1936?

CJ: Yes, everything. We must have moved in 1935 because we were over there a year or so before I was discharged.

SJ: They didn't leave anyone behind at the old camp, a caretaker?

CJ: No, I don't believe so. I don't think I ever heard what happened to that camp, or what they did with it. But they eventually tore it down because when I came back up here my wife says, where we had always talked about retiring, where we would locate - and we flew up here the summer of 1973 I think it was, and my nephew took us out there to this old camp site at Big Lake and there isn't a thing there, that's grown up and everything. You can't even get in on the lot. And that was the beginning of our coming up here on our retirement and I found this lot up here at Bemidji and here I am.
SJ: I'm sure there are other things we can probably think of or may have missed, so we'll just have to say we would like to come back sometime and fill in a little more, with your permission we would like to use it in a program or history of the CCC era, if that's all right with you.

CJ: I think it would be pretty educational to these younger kids that are interested in that. It shows them what happened 30 and 40 years ago.