SJ: This is an interview with Irv Nelson, Bemidji, Minnesota. Interview made on April 15, 1976 at Mr. Nelson's residence - this interview covers his recollections in the Rabideau CCC Camp at Rabideau Lake south of Blackduck, Minnesota. Irv is going to tell us about the CCC camp which was designated #708 and located at Rabideau but originally established at a different location.

Where was CCC Camp #708 first located?

IN: Company #708 originated at Fort Snelling, Minnesota on May 5, 1933, and was moved to Winnie Dam or Bena on May 27, 1933. There were 188 enrollees plus the Army personnel that arrived at Deer River and were hauled to Winnie Dam on trucks. They arrived at Winnie Dam and set up a tent camp and were in the tent camp for several months before they got going on their permanent camp there. It was started to be built with civilian labor and it was back and forth, civilian and then CCC labor, and then finally they got sixteen buildings of the palisade type built there and was completed in about October of the same year. The building was interrupted quite a lot that fall by a rash of fires and they would be pulled off to fight fires.

SJ: Were you enrolled at this first camp location?

IN: No, I enrolled after the company moved to Blackduck at Rabideau Lake, six miles south of Blackduck.

SJ: What year did they arrive at that place?

IN: They moved there January 5, 1936.

SJ: Were the buildings already in place?

IN: Yes.

SJ: Do you recall anything about the camp construction as far as where they may have purchased the lumber?
IN: No. I actually enrolled on April 6, after they had moved over there on January 5. And the buildings were all up when I arrived. I believe they told me they were built by civilian labor the fall before.

SJ: Had you heard of any problems they were having moving to a new location?

IN: There were plenty of problems that spring when the boys moved there. In January the weather was very severe. Between 30 and 45 below zero and they found that their wood supply was exhausted so it took the whole company to get wood in and keep the fires going for some time; the heating was done with barrel stoves and it was cutting wood and standing around the fires for some period.

SJ: What do you recall about your first days in camp?

IN: Well, I was a pretty scared kid. I was probably seventeen years old, and something new to me. I had never really been away from home before for any time at all, and I guess we were all in the same boat. I think there were about 80 of us that came in there at the same time. Then we went through a series of changes - everything was under the army regulations which was something different for us and we had to go through two series of shots; it seems they gave us shots for everything and I think it was always a square needle. Then we got our clothing issued which was worse yet; nothing fit on the first issue of clothing. It was two sizes either too big or too small.

SJ: Was the Forest Service also involved?

IN: Yes. About all the Army had to do was take care of the men in the camp and clothe and feed them. The men were out under the Forestry for eight hours a day and sometimes other shifts, and at night depending on whether they were fighting fires or general woods work - their shifts in the towers, the fire lookout towers, patrolling, and a variety of things.

SJ: Were the men divided between the Forest Service and the Army from the first thing in the morning as far as assigning them duties?

IN: Yes. After they had their breakfast and made up their barracks, the boys were all mustered out in the muster area and then the Forestry would assign crews and men to different sites and different jobs. From building roads to planting trees and, of course, during the fire season there were always stand-by fire crews and the trucks that went out on the jobs were equipped for fighting fires, too. They might be pulled out from planting trees or whatever. Of course, fire was the first order.

SJ: Tell us about the educational program connected with the camp.

IN: They had a very good educational program. Our educational adviser all the time I was there (two years and one month) was Claire Rollings. He was there long before me and after me, too. In fact, he was the oldest man in Company #708. But Claire Rollings was probably the boys' best friend in the company - he got them any kind of education about that they wanted to get. If he couldn't teach it there he got these courses elsewhere for the boys.
SJ: Was this normally after work hours?

IN: Yes, and Saturdays, Sundays, and then he taught classes in different things. We had a shop of woodworking tools and they taught a little bit of everything. They had clubs going; had a Junior Audubon Club going there. They had field hikes. They taught surveying.

SJ: Did most of the enrollees participate in these programs?

IN: There were a few that didn't, but most of them I think did enroll in these classes.

SJ: How about recreational activities?

IN: We had our teams; we had a basketball team, softball team, football and they played amongst the other camps - one camp would play another camp and we had some of the boys that were even on the Blackduck team. Blackduck played Bemidji and beat them - I have the records of that.

SJ: Were there any water activities on the two lakes?

IN: Well, we did quite a lot of boating; we made our own boats there. Claire Rollings got plans and made these kayak-type boats. Swimming and fishing, we had very good swimming there.

SJ: What do you remember about the buildings, the general layout and some of the major buildings that may have been in at that time.

IN: Well, the buildings - there were eight barracks with a capacity of maybe 40 men each. The buildings were of frame construction; they had wainscoting bottoms and fiberboard, insulation board, for the tops and ceilings. And the amount of buildings was eight barracks for the enrollees - one for the Army officers - one for the Forestry - there was an Army office, Forestry Office, hospital, an educational building, mess hall, latrine, pumphouse and generator room, Forestry garage and oil storage building and recreation hall used for church and movies, too.

SJ: Was the maintenance of these buildings done by the Army?

IN: The maintenance of the buildings was mostly done by the Army. They painted them and kept up the grounds. After I came there they sodded most of the grounds, went out in the fields and cut sod - it was a muddy mess in the spring. But the camp was fixed up real nice; we earned the flag of excellency from the Army and we flew it most of the time with our regular flag. The Army was very strict about the grounds. They kept the men working a lot of Saturdays and Sundays to keep those grounds in shape.

SJ: Did you have a regular schedule as far as hours went?

IN: I don't recall the exact time we got up, but it seems like it was 6 or 6:30 and then we'd get our call to wash up and then we'd get the call for mess in the morning. After breakfast we had to go back and make up our bunks, clean up the barracks and be out to the muster area for our day's assignment by I suppose quarter to eight, or eight o'clock. It was a pretty close schedule.
SJ: Did you have good clothing and good food?

IN: I would say it was good food; course we always complained about it but I believe the food was good and there was plenty of it, and after our first issue of clothing, why our clothes weren't so bad, either. We had warm clothes in the winter - when we didn't have warm clothes they didn't put us out, so we did get them. One thing I forgot, every morning after breakfast was also sick call - if any of the boys were sick or any ailments they had maybe a half hour there that they could go to the hospital and be checked over, or, if they were sick, they weren't sent out to the woods.

SJ: Were there doctors on the staff at that time?

Yes. We had a full-time army doctor, a contract surgeon for the Army. His name was Eronrich.

SJ: Do you recall the name of the camp superintendent and the other overhead people there?

IN: Yes. Captain Free was the first officer we had in Company #708. He was there a short time. And then Lieutenant Free who later became Captain Free, he was in command for the Army about all the time I was there and we had - John Herrington and Mike Veranish, both were original company men - they left there in about the spring of 1937 - that was the last of the old company. Then it was all new company. None of them had originated with the company. The superintendent all the time I was there was D.W. Campbell from Duluth. But about the time I left there Charles Knoblauch became the superintendent of the camp. That was over all of the Forestry. We had quite a few of the Forestry men there in different capacities. There was Lloyd Griffin, he was a Forestry mechanic; Bill Gaines was a Forestry mechanic; Henry Hanson was a machine operator; there were two Henry Hansons, one was a construction foreman; and Ed Hamel was construction foreman; Donovan Hield was a technical foreman; Raymond Mattson was technical foreman; Bert Moen was construction foreman; John Myers was mechanic; Vern Osmundson was technical; Ed Orberd was machine operator; Weller was a machine operator; Willard Wright was a technical foreman; Kermit Wesseen was an enrollee who got the appointment of technical foreman. I don't know what happened to him.

SJ: Was the total camp strength normally quite stable?

IN: I would say it was - over 200 up to 250, I'd say.

SJ: You did have some turnover of personnel from time to time?

IN: Quite a lot. The boys left there after they got jobs, and there were some transferred in and some transferred out.

SJ: They could leave anytime they waded to if they had employment?

IN: If you could get employment you could leave at any time.

SJ: Were there different wages and titles for the enrollees?
IN: Yes. As far as the enrollees were concerned, the LEM was the top and leaders, which were both paid the same. The LEM was a locally experienced man. They a lot of times didn't stay in the camps, but they lived right near, they could come and go as they wished. The leaders were $45 men, they were over the assistant leader, and the enrollees. The leaders got $45, assistant leaders $35, enrollees got $30.

SJ: Part of this was sent home?

IN: Yes, for the enrollee $25 was sent home and $5 was for the enrollee himself.

SJ: Did you have a place to spend money in the camp itself?

IN: Yes, we had a canteen at one end of the recreation hall where we could buy pop or candy or cigarettes, toilet articles, necessities.

SJ: Do you recall any problems they had in getting supplies or having equipment for jobs while you were there?

IN: I don't recall too much of that. I know there were problems at times but I really didn't know too much about it.

SJ: When the Forest Service took over the crews each morning, what were some of the jobs they were sent out on?

IN: Oh, they went out building roads, planting trees, road cleanup, surveys, fighting fires of course, and general forestry work - some cutting wood to bring back for the Army for cooking and heating.

SJ: Any problem in the cold weather as far as getting out to the jobs?

IN: Well, when it got down to a certain degree below - I don't just recall what it was - I believe it was around 30 degrees. Why then they wouldn't send us out unless it was something that just had to be done. They'd keep us in camp if it got too severely cold.

SJ: After some of these enrollees left the camp, do you know of any cases where they've come back and settled in the area?

IN: Yes. After the camp was closed they tell me that after the first part of the war they used that camp for a short time for some prisoners. One of these prisoners liked the camp so well that after the war he came back and bought a parcel of land close to it. I guess he still lives there but the boys, I think they pretty much went back to where they were from - I came back here to Bemidji. I was from Aitkin at that time - but I know we have contacted a lot of the boys for these CCC 708 reunions and there are boys in every walk of life; some of them made a career of forestry - some of them are sheriffs, we have attorneys, doctors, truck drivers, salesmen, every walk of life. We have contacted 300 of them. Of course, now there are more of them retired than anything else.

SJ: What year was the camp closed?
IN: I haven't got the exact date, Stan, but it was after the war started. Ray Mattson told me that he was the last man in camp. But I never did get the date from him. He said it was after the war started.

SJ: Were prisoners of war kept there that you have heard about?

I understand there were some kept there for a while.

SJ: Then later the camp was used for other purposes?

IN: Yes, the University of Illinois engineers came in there and leased the camp the first year, it was 1946. And then in 1948 the Illinois University foresters joined the engineers, and they used the camp up until 1973 - that was the first year they didn't use it. So they used it through 1972.

SJ: Is there evidence of some of the accomplishments showing up in these approximately 40 years after the camp has been closed?

IN: Well, I'll tell you, it was harvesting some of the trees the last few years since live been here, and there's a lot of difference in the forest and the trees, and the roads, from that time.

SJ: You are holding reunions now periodically?

IN: We have had four reunions and we're holding them every two years. We are trying to change it to every year, but it'll be a two- year period before our next one which will be the first weekend in August of 1977.

SJ: Approximately how many former enrollees are you in contact with at the present?

IN: Approximately 300.

SJ: And you have a part of these that return to each reunion?

IN: We've had over 200 of them that have returned for reunions also from all over the United States.

SJ: And at the present time part of the buildings remain on the site?

IN: Yes, there are a few of the buildings that are missing - there is the latrine, there's one barracks, the garage is missing, and the officer's office building is missing.

SJ: These have been torn down or burned down?

IN: I believe they said the one barracks burned down, the rest of them I think were torn down.

SJ: What equipment was used in the educational building?

IN: It was a very well equipped school - it wasn't the best of everything but it was very good. And the boys spent a lot of evenings there and Saturdays and Sundays, leisure hours, and the school was equipped with woodworking tools, typewriters, motion pictures, projectors, they
showed a lot, of educational pictures in teaching, and forestry classes, woodworking classes, diesel engines, mechanics. There was a Junior Audubon Club, they even had garden clubs during the summer. But Claire Rollings was a very good teacher and well liked by everyone.

SJ: Were these optional classes that you could take if you were interested?

IN: All of the classes were optional. Nobody was forced to take any classes. But most of the boys wanted to study or learn something.

SJ: You were generating your own power?

IN: Yes. We had our own generator plant and generated all of our own power, of course our own well, we had our problems with the generators, too. Once in a while - we had two of them; one for emergency - the lights of course were conserved - at night they were put out probably at 10:00 or 10:30 and then emergency lighting for the night, only. I don't believe they ran the generators at that time. I believe they ran on batteries, just emergency batteries for the rest of the night.

SJ: Another important building at that location was the tool house - was this a Forest Service operation?

IN: Yes, it was. It all belonged to the Forest Service and we had very good tools. We had our boys who kept them all sharp and took care of them. They were checked out to you, and you checked them back in, always with your name on. They were charged to you. Course they had cross-cut saws; they didn't have any chainsaws or anything like that. The only power saw we had was a gasoline saw rig that they sawed up the blockwood for heating the camp. Shovels, axes, cross-cut saws, cant hooks, PVs, comealongs, and hand tools of about every kind and description. They had a very thorough set of tools.

SJ: Any kind of safety program in those days?

IN: Yes. At the school they had a safety class that all of the rated men had to attend, and it was optional for some of the rest of us to attend these safety meetings. Well, we had a first aid class for the rest of us, but the rated men and foresters all had to attend this class once a week on safety and they were very safety-minded and we went through with a minimum of accidents. Some of them couldn't be helped - we had as I recall one of the boys lost his hand - he ran it into a belt on a saw rig and he lost the use of his entire arm but it pulled his hand out at the wrist. At that time it was one of the most terrible things.

SJ: Were there many of these enrollees unaccustomed to using these tools?

IN: Yes, there were. The enrollees came from all over the state of Minnesota. But at times we did have some boys in there from Kansas and Missouri and all these tools were new to them. To me they weren't new because I was brought up in the woods and a lot of the boys were brought up in the woods, but a lot of the boys from like Minneapolis-St. Paul and other cities, they had to be taught all that stuff.

SJ: Were they in physical condition to do this harder outdoor work when they arrived?
IN: No, not too much. They went out in a lot different physical condition than when they went in. But it didn't take really too long, with the way they fed them and the exercises that they gave them until they were different boys, all of us.

SJ: In addition to small tools, you needed some heavy equipment. Do you recall what you had in that line?

IN: Yes, we didn't have too much when we first went there, except getting more and more equipment. As I recall we had about four or five Caterpillars while I was there. We may have had about 25 trucks altogether, which I imagine 15 or 18 of them were dump trucks - the rest were stake trucks. We started out with a large Cat for a snowplow which was replaced the first year with an FWD, fast snowplow. We had two road patrols, two hand graders, some tumble bugs for building roads and they also used I think four of these Cats I think for plowing to plant trees. They planted them in furrows quite a lot at that time. The rest of the planting was all done by scalping and planting, scalping about 18 inch squares and planting the tree in the center of it.

SJ: Were some of these trucks located at other points on some of your projects that were going on?

IN: Yes, we had about 13 to 17 dump trucks that were stationed east of Camp Rabideau, back of Rabideau Lake, and they built a winter garage back there for them. It was in the area they were building most of the fire roads and roads, and during the winter they - one of the stoves I believe overheated - they had night watchmen there keeping the fires going and burned this garage down back there. I believe there were from 13 to 17 trucks that burned up in it. Dump trucks, I believe there was a new FWD, snowplow truck was burned, and maybe one Caterpillar.

SJ: Was this fleet of equipment used on a special project over in that area?

IN: Yes, they were graveling roads for fire trails and they had a gravel pit over there. They were hauling gravel from it.

SJ: Do you recall any work on that road to Hines? The Hines spur to Rabideau Lake?

IN: Well, as I recall they worked on it every year. It was a railroad track. There was a spur from Hines and they had taken the track off and filled over the ties to make the road.

SJ: The road was probably in before the camp came?

IN: Yes. I think they had torn the rails off before the camp came in there and just covered the ties. But it was mostly road improvement and surfacing that was being done. It was always ruts, I don't think that road ever was smooth. It seems like they would sink in between the ties.

SJ: Was that station close to the gravel pit?

IN: Yes, very close.

SJ: Do you recall any particular experiences during your time in camp?
IN: Well, a lot of good ones and a lot of bad ones, Stan. Personal experiences not too many but they were wonderful times, some wonderful buddies. I recall one of our outings over there that Claire Rollins was over. We used to go out on an overnight outing with him, camp out, so we had gone down to what was called Sucker Creek in back of the camp and speared fish, fried them up and had a fish fry, and we had one guy there that never could be filled up. So there was a big plate of fish left over, after we were all filled up at night there. The guys rolled into their beds, you know, and during the night this guy got hungry, and he went after the fish and made a racket and a few of the boys thought there was a bear in camp. They jumped up and he ran, and right into the creek he went. Fish and all.

SJ: The Civilian Conservation program lasted about nine years, from 1933 to 1942, and you were a part of the program. What would you say was the greatest accomplishment the program covered?

IN: You know, I've thought about it a lot, and I don't believe the Army regulations hurt the boys at that time. I think it made men out of them. I've talked to a lot of the boys and they feel the same way and the experiences of everything right straight through I think made better men out of us. And they're all very conservation-minded; we have a bunch of conservationists that came out of there. I think the Army discipline was a wonderful thing at that time. The boys were young, the first time away from home. They learned discipline and respect. There are some fine boys that have turned out of the CCCs.