[Transcriber's note: This transcript is from a tape Albert J. "A.J." Willett recorded himself, relating his experiences in the Civilian Conservation Corps. The recording was done at various times and with different tape recorders, evidenced by changes in Willett's voice and the sound of the recordings themselves.]

START SIDE A

Hello. I'm going to tell you about the second time I went to the Civilian Conservation Corps, known as the CCC. [tape stops, then starts again]

I took the streetcar and went back down to Hampton to the courthouse where Miss House was and signed up again for the CCC. And then I went home to wait. [tape stops, then starts again] I went home and waited a while, maybe three or four, five, ten days. And Miss House came by one day and gave me some papers and said, "Albert, if you still want to go to the CCC," said, "you can take these papers and tomorrow go up to Williamsburg and when you get to Williamsburg, go to the train station. And you'll meet a ( ) officer there and give him these papers.

I got up the next morning and left, and went out to thumb a ride to Williamsburg. I got up to the old courthouse in York County and just after you leave the courthouse, you went down a ravine and then up on top of a hill. So I walked up to the top of the hill, because usually people will stop and pick you up quicker if you was on a place like that. They wouldn't stop for you when they're going down a hill, but they would stop for you on the top of the hill. So finally here comes a bus by there, and I stopped and the bus stopped and I asked him, said, "Where are you going?" I said, "Going to Williamsburg." He said, "Well, I hate to drive this big bus," it was a Greyhound bus, "to Williamsburg alone." Said, "Hop in," says, "I'll give you a ride." I hopped in the bus and we went on over, on up to Williamsburg. When we got into Williamsburg, and I got out, I heard the people,

one of them looking at the other one, standing at the bus station. He says, "My god," he says, "how in the world can that man afford to charter a bus to bring him up here, just one person getting off the bus!" [tape stops, then starts again] I looked back to see what they were talking about, and on the front of the bus across the top was a big, red "Charter" and on each side there was big, red "Charter."

[tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] ( ). So I left the bus station and walked down to where the train station was, where we were supposed to meet this army officer and give him these papers. So when I got to the train station, there was me and two other fellows. One was from Isle of Wight County and one was from a small town in Southampton County named Sidney. So we all three got then, got to talking and finally this army officer drove up and got to talk with us. And we told him we were going into camp and I handed him the papers. So he had some other papers with him he gave us. I told him I had been in camp before. He said, "Well, you'll be the one to take care of these papers." Said, "You take these, and here's your train tickets for you three and your meal, money to buy your meals with." And said, "You get on the train here and go to Richmond," which was a C & O train. "And then when you got into Richmond, you switch off that C & O and get on the N & W train."

[tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . N & W train, and that took us through Farmville, I believe it was, and on up to Lynchburg and on into Roanoke. We got into Roanoke station, there was a Civilian Conservation truck waiting to pick us up. [tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . from Roanoke into Catawba, across Catawba Mountain, down in the valley and went on over to a place called New Castle, Virginia. Then when we got into New Castle, Virginia, we got on this dirt road that had these switchbacks on it. A switchback is a place on the side of a hill that's so sharp, that when you go straight ahead and then you'll make a complete turn and head back in a different direction, where the hill was so steep, you had to switch back about three times to get down to the

bottom of the other side of the hill. After we got to the bottom of the hill, there was a bridge we crossed. And we crossed this road and we hit a another gravel road, and that's where the camp was. Before you went over the bridge, on the right hand side, was the forestry station, and a place for the trucks to go out, just all for the trucks.

Up to the left before you went over the bridge, there was a log cabin that one of the lieutenants moved, were living into. And then over on the right hand side down but past to where the truck garage and all was, there was another cabin that one of the other lieutenants lived into. You went across the bridge to our left, there was a supply house. [tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . barracks on the right hand side plus the recreation hall and the dining

hall. The dining hall was in the middle. And on the other side, there was a place to get our clothes from. [tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . ( ) house, and then there was a couple more barracks and then there was a wash house and then past the wash house was a building they used for schooling ( ) where you could learn to type and go to school. And then on the other side of that was a carpenter shop where they had a long building there to build things in for the camp, for the carpenters to build. [tape stops, starts in mid-sentence]

. . . in camp a few days, and did KP work and piddled around in the camp, and one day he got, one of the lieutenants come by, and said he wanted all the people who had done any carpenter work at all or painting work to come up in front of Barrack #1. And we got up there and they had trestle benches set up, with a piece of plywood on the top and a chalk line down through the middle where you could split it in two two-foot pieces, instead of a four by eight, it would be two two by eight pieces. So he give us a hand saw, told each one, says, "Now go ahead and cut that straight on the line." Well, I had done a little work before because my father was a ( ). And after I start cutting, I kept mine right on the line. Some of the fellows that was ripping the stuff would get as much as an

inch, inch and a half off the line, and they couldn't get the saw to come back. So I cut mine straight down the line, and when the lieutenant looked at where I'd cut the board, he looked at me and said, "From now on," says, "you're a carpenter in this camp." So that's the type of work I started out doing.

First, we was cutting these strips, two by eight, to make some six by six entrance ways to go on the front of the barracks, in the buildings, where it was so cold, that you could go in the one door, shut that door, and open the other one. And the cold air wouldn't go in to where you were sitting, because you had two doors. [tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . built these six entrances, I think it was six barracks, and I believe we may have put some on some of the other buildings, but I'm not sure. But we went ahead and we finished all of these, moved the steps out in front where'd they come down, on from the piece that we added on to it.

After we got this done, they got us to go inside the barracks and the barracks, by this time, the boys had put this beaver board, it was a soft piece of wood, something like sheet rock but it was made real soft. And there on the bottom, near the floor, they had kicked a lot of holes into it. It was, you could tear a hole in it pretty easy. Just falling against it, anything like that, you'd knock a hole into it. So they got us to take 3/8 plywood, four foot high, and go all around the bottom of all the barracks and the buildings that had this type of wall panels put

into it.

When we got them done, they came to us one day, and told us they wanted us to go down and in Carver's Creek Station, there was a couple of buildings down there they wanted us to put some roll roofing on. So they took the material and trucks and about four of us boys and went down, started putting them on. One was a boy that had been in the navy, we called Sailor, and I don't remember the other ones. But we finished these two roofs. So the next day, or a couple days later, they got ( ) and they told us they wanted us to go up on the Barbour's Creek, turn left, and go up on that mountain.

And there was a fire tower up there, for us to put a new roof on. So we took the truck and loaded it up and drove up to the fire tower. We got to the fire tower and we started taking the material up the steps. It was about 80 foot off the ground. And we got up to the top of that fire tower, I took one look and I said, "Look," I said, "this is it. I don't go any higher." And Sailor looked at me and says, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I just, I'm not going up on that roof. And, and work." I said, "If I fall off that thing," I said, "I can see myself right now falling down there and being chopped to pieces by those cross braces on this fire tower." And he said, "Well," says, "if you want me to," he says, "I don't mind going up there and work." Says, "I'll go up there and put it on." Said, "If y'all will bring all the material up and put it on the landing and hand it to me, I'll get up on the roof and put it on." I said, "Brother, let me tell you one thing, I'll bring you anything you want, why, I'd bring it up there and put it on that platform. But this is as high as I go. I don't get any higher off the ground." We were up on top of a mountain, and we were 80 foot, just about, from the ground to the platform. And you looked down over that 80 foot and then looked down the side of the mountain and it was a long ways to the bottom! So we got, all got together and carried the material up there, and Sailor got up on the roof. You could go inside, and there was a trap door you could come up through the roof. And that's where we'd hand him material. He got out on that, took a rope, there was a knob in the middle of it, sticking up, and it was a four sided, it was a hip roof. So he tied a rope around that knob and then wrapped it around his waist. And he'd go put the bottom strip on first, then he'd wrap the rope around his waist a couple more time and move up. And finally he got it all on, we got that finished.

After we got that finished, they had put some beaver in a pond up there to try to get the beaver to grow back up in that section. I don't know why they'd want beaver up there. But in doing that, somehow or another a man's stream, spring water, said he was drinking, came from that, a place where

they had put the beaver in the pond. And it polluted his water. So he got after the government and the government decided that they'd go up on the hill, to another spring that was about 19 hundred feet up past this place in Barbour's Creek, so we could put a pipeline down and run it to the man's house to give him water to drink. So he set the pipe out there, it was anywhere from 3/4 [inch] and then it kept getting larger and larger until we got to a two inch pipe. And we dug the whole thing out, we start laying it off, and they were digging it crooked, this way and the other. I said something to the leader that was working there. I said, "Look," I said, "if they keep digging like that, we'll never get the pipe in there. And he said, "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "Well, look how crooked it is. There's no way in the world you can bend that pipe." And he said, "Well, do you think you can do better?" I said, "Well, I could take some stakes and put some line down through here, and just make a slight bend. And every ten foot put a stake and each band dig a ten foot space." He said, "Well, you go get the wooden pegs and you do that, now. So I pegged it all out, from top to bottom. I believe it was 19 hundred and 50 feet. We put it all in, and nobody thought to look at anything, put it all together and let the water come through it. The water run for about a minute or two and all of a sudden it shut off. So we start digging down in the lower part and we dug maybe a third of the pipe up, and I took it apart and we couldn't find anything wrong with it. So we went to the other end, where the two inch pipe was and started at the spring and started taking it apart and digging it up. We dug about another third. It only left about a third of it, so finally somebody in the crowd, I don't know who it was, says, "You know where we reduced this pipe," says, "there's no sense in us digging it all up." Says, "We just dig up where we put the reducers in to make the pipe smaller." And so that's what we did. We measured it off, went down, started taking the pipe loose where we had put the reducers in. Finally we got to one, we found out what it was. They had stuffed the bill, the paperwork for the pipe up in the pipe. And nobody had thought to look through them and be sure,

you know, that it would flow up through them. So we put the pipe in with the bill into it, and that's what stopped it up. And we got that off and got that running, got the water running good.

[tape stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . camp about two weeks, three weeks, and one of the boys in there told me that there was a boy up in Barrack #5 that was from Hampton, Virginia. So I went down to this barrack to find out who he was. And when I went in there, his name was Erby [?] Harris. And he lived about, maybe one mile from my house. He lived on Alisa [?] Avenue in Hampton, I lived on Seely Avenue. So we got to talking to each other, and he asked me about different people that I knew. One of them was our ( ) and different like that. But we didn't really know each other. But anyway, we sit there and talk for a while, and I went on back to my camp. In 1949, I was building houses out in Cherry Acres out in Hampton, Virginia, and this fellow come out there looking for a job. And it was Erby Harris. So I hired him and he worked for me about a year, until I finished that project, and when I finished that project, he went somewhere else to work.

There was one boy in the camp about my size, and he kept picking on this one little boy until they got in a fight. And then they got in a fight and the lieutenant came down to see him and he blamed it on the little boy. So the lieutenant gave the little boy extra work to do. We went on to work the next day and when we come in the next afternoon, they got this little boy to do the extra duty. He was cleaning up trash, and working around the camp and doing things of that type. And while he was doing it, this other boy about my size was in the barracks bragging and laughing about how he had done something and the other boy was doing the work for him. Well, he finally made me so mad and I smacked him up side the head and knocked him across the bunk. While he was laying there on the bunk, this other fellow that I work with, Daffenbaugh [?], he was a lot bigger than I was. So he come over there and says, "Look, Whitey," says, "you're always beating on these people in camp." Said, "Why don't you hit somebody as big as me?" I said, "Well, that would be a good

idea." Says, "I can knock you down," I said, "then these other fellows in camp wouldn't bother me any more." And finally he said, "Well, by the way, what did you hit him for?" So I told him what had happened, how he had picked a fight with a boy, then turn around and told the lieutenant that it was the boy's fault, got the little boy extra duty work to do, and he was up in there, gloating over it and laughing about it at the door while the boy was doing the work. And I told him I took it so long and that was it. Said I wasn't going to take it any more. So Daffenbaugh looked at me then and he said, "Well, that's what you should have done." Says, "Let him go ahead and forget about it."

Daffenbaugh was the leader in our barracks. He was the one that would get $45 a month instead of the 30. Daffenbaugh and I were working together in the carpenter shop and we got along good all the time. I worked with him until I quit working in the carpenter shop.

The lieutenant would let us use the trucks to go in town on Saturdays, providing that the truck driver drove the truck. Greasy Jones was one of the truck drivers, so we decided to go into Roanoke one Saturday night. So we took and went into town one Saturday night, went to the show and what have you, in Roanoke. So we start coming back home, and we had to go up over Catawba Mountain, come down Catawba Mountain and when you got down the other side of Catawba Mountain, there was a little, narrow bridge there. It was a one-way bridge. It had the sides on it about three foot tall. And it was only for one car to pass but it was right wide. So we were coming down the hill real fast and when just as we got about half way in the bridge, this car pulls in on the other side and meets us. So the truck driver just hugged his side of the bridge and fellow driving the car hugged his side, and we passed each other. Well, the bridge wasn't too long, probably about 150 feet, 200 feet, so when we got on each side of the bridge, we got on one side and he got on the other, we stopped and walked back to see what was what, to see if anybody was hurt. And there wasn't anybody hurt. We got talking about it and said, well, I don't know how in the world you could pass on that bridge and not

hit each other! So we got a ruler out and started measuring. The truck body was eight foot wide, and the car itself, I forget exactly how wide the car was. But the car and the truck measured at the bottom, not the car and truck itself, but measuring the truck, the body and the car, it was seven or eight inches wider than the bridge itself. About the only thing that saved us was the body was sticking on the car and you had one of these convertible cars that you leave the windshield down on the, the hood, like you did in those days. The windshields was on hinges and you could lay them flat on the thing, the hood. And that's what made us so we could pass each other without hitting. If it had been a ( ) or sedan or something like that, we'd of had a wreck. Set there for a while, went down to the water and washed our face because we was, it was late and we was all sleepy and tired to start with. Washed our face ( ) in the stream where it was cool, then we got back in the car and went, the truck and went back into camp.

They hadn't put the flush toilets in this camp and what we had was latrines on the outside. And it was one man's job to keep these latrines clean. He'd have to scrub them out and disinfect them and what have you. But anyway, this one latrine was set on the side of the hill, it must of had six stools on one side and six on the other. They wasn't actually stools, it was just a wooden box made up with round holes for you to sit on. Well, anyway, he went in there one day and took gasoline to clean it with. He'd been doing this for months and nothing had happened. He usually did it when the boys was off to work. And he'd take gasoline and go in there and rub all around the seats and across the top. He'd take a stick with a, put a rag on the end of it and wrap it around and tie it and he'd rub this gasoline all around in there. Well, this one particular day when he got through, he had some left in the bucket, so he just dumped it down in the hole. And evidently it must of made a lot of fumes in there. One of the fellows came in there to use the bathroom and he set on the stool and he started to smoke a cigarette. So he lit the cigarette and when he did, he took the match and just

dropped it down the hole next to him. And there was a heck of an explosion. And just like I say, it was kind of on a hill so one side wasn't completely on the ground, the box it was sitting on, it must have been a foot and a half sticking out of the ground. Well, the explosion was so great, it blew that out about six to eight, ten inches from the foundation of the house, and really wrecked the latrine. The boy sitting in there was lucky; the only thing happened to him, he got a big sunburn around his rear. I mean to tell you, it was burnt right bad. And he couldn't sit down for two or three months. But that was the only thing that happened to that, was that burn on him.

When Erby Harris came to work for me out at Cherry Acres, we got out there talking one day and he told me about being in the CC camp and I told him I was, too. So he asked me at the time what camp I was in, and I told. He said, "Well, that was the camp I was in." So I couldn't remember at the time about going down there, talking to him. So he didn't remember me and I didn't remember him. But he remembered this incident about the toilet being blowed up and that's how we actually knew we was both in camp the same time. And then in later years, he passed away back in the '80's and after he passed away, it came to me and I remembered going up there and talking to him, and asking him about different things and he was telling me about this man that he knew, that . . . lived in Lasalle [?] Avenue with him.

[tape stops, restarts in mid-sentence] . . . gave everybody a nickname and just about the time they come into camp. [tape stops, restarts in mid-sentence] . . . had. But the fellow from Sudley, Virginia, he was a, drawl when he talked, so somebody asked him, said, "Where are you from?" And he said, "Sudley." [suuuud-lee, first syllable drawn out] And when he drawls it out like that, from then on until the day he left camp, his name was Sudley.

Two of the boys was fighting one day in the camp and everybody would not tell on each other. But they were fighting and one of them knocked one of them across the bunk and hurt his back. It

must have been hurt pretty bad, because they had to take him to Walter Reed Hospital up in Washington, and they kept him up there for about three months. So when this happened, the lieutenant came down and wanted to know what happened. So one of the boys told him that he tripped over one of those lockers that we had. We had wood lockers down at the foot of our bed for to put our clothes in. And they were covered with metal. So he said, well, the best thing to do was get rid of those lockers. So he went and got a sketch made up to make some wall lockers. So me and Daffenbaugh and another fellow, I don't know who his name was, we worked in the carpenter shop. So they ordered us a bunch of one by sixes, used lumber, and it was pretty rough and we had to make a decent-looking locker out of it. So we finally got them together and start making the lockers. We wind up, we had to make, I believe it was about 200 to a camp, I'm not really sure. It was right, anywhere from 175 to 225 lockers. But we made all these lockers and put them on the walls and that gave them a lot more room in the hallway, like you're walking down at the foot of the beds. So we got all of them done and the first I know, some other fellow came from another camp, another lieutenant, and seen the lockers. He talked about what a good idea it was, and so they got us to build lockers for another camp. So we built the lockers for another camp and when they did, they come and picked them up in a truck and they carried them away and they installed them themselves.

Daffenbaugh and I one day got together and we cut a bunch of strips out and then after we got off work in the afternoon, we'd go down and we made us two little replicas of the fire towers. And the way we made them was the top of the fire tower and we had the open places where they had windows in theirs, we just left them open and made a, put a lamp up in there where you could make a reading lamp with these fire towers. And they did look right good, they was about five foot tall. So one day the lieutenant come down there and looked at them and he said he wanted one of them. We told him, we said, well, we'll make you one later. He says, "Well, I'm going home this weekend."

Says, "I'd like to go and take one with me." So I told him, I said, "Well, I don't want to get rid of mine," and Daffenbaugh said, "No, I don't want to get rid of mine." I said, "Well. . ." He says, "I'll give you $20, one of you $20 for one of those lamps." So Daffenbaugh looked at me and I looked at Daffenbaugh and Daffenbaugh says, "Well, I don't want to part with mine." Well, a twenty dollar bill in those days looked like a lot of money to me, so I parted with my lamp, and let the lieutenant take it home with him. But I never did build another lamp.

The ( ) that the man caused to get the extra work, I called him a little boy, he was just small for his age. But one day he got a letter from his mother, and she had written a letter to him and told him that she had had a baby and she was living in a car body. And I read the letter myself. So I'd hitchhiked home quite a few times and I'd started home, and so he wanted to know if he could go along with me as far as he could until we separated. We'd have to separate when we got to Lynchburg, because he would be going one way, and I would be going the other. He'd be going north, and I'd be going east. So we started hitchhiking together. We got talking about this, that and everything, and he was talking about how his mother was, and they didn't have anything to eat, and I don't know what all. And we got on the bridge where you're going, where you cross the James River and in them days, the road came straight to the, across the bridge and then made a 90° turn and went left, then made another 90° turn and went right again. When you were thumbing a ride like that, if you would get on a hill or get on a sharp curve where they had to slow down, they would stop quicker for you than they would if you was out on the open road or if you were going down or uphill where they'd have to change gears after they stopped to pick you up. We stood there for a few minutes and the first thing you know, a yellow cab from Washington, D.C. came by and it screeched on brakes and stopped and picked us up and asked us where we were going. I told him I was going to Hampton,

Virginia, and the little boy told him he was going to Berryville, Virginia. Well, if he went with the taxi cab driver, he would be within 20 miles of his home. So we got in the taxi cab and he carried us up to the traffic circle there where Route 60 and 29 cross. 29 was going north, which is the way the taxi was going, 60 was going east, so I had to get off at this time. See, that little traffic circle they had there was one of the two that was in the state of Virginia at that time. The other one was up at Tyson's Corner, I think it was, near Washington, D.C. And the, traffic circles wasn't like they are today. They were small things and I doubt if they was over 100 foot across. They were just there to make you slow down and run around a circle so that you could turn off onto the road that you wanted to go off on. They didn't have the cloverleafs like they got today. They just had a road where you turn off at each place. A person be riding those roads at night and they would miss the traffic circle and go right across it. They didn't have a curbing around it. They had a little low place where you could drain the water around, and drain it through the, out from under the traffic circle. So if you hit that traffic circle and went across it, you really didn't do much damage to your car. But you could see a lot of tire marks on these traffic circles where the people had run across them many a time. I went on home and after I got home I got looking at this, that and everything. I had a friend that had a junk yard, and I went down to this junk yard and was talking to him, and he had an old '31 Oldsmobile convertible that somebody had sold him for almost nothing. And he told me that he'd give, let me take tires off another car and put on that one, so the tires would be better and sell it to me for $65. So I thinking, well, where would I get $65 from? So I told him, I said, "Now, look, I'll get what I can. How much will you let me take the car for and I'll bring the money back to you later, the balance of it?" And he said, "Well, if you can get me," it was either 35 or 40 dollars of it, he said, "you can go ahead and take the car. Then you can come back in another month or two and pay the balance of it." So I said alright. So my daddy was working on a project in Williamsburg, then. So

I hitchhiked to Williamsburg and got enough money from my daddy to buy the car. So I got the car, got the license onto it, they didn't have inspections in those days, that I can remember. But anyway, I got in the car and I drove on back to camp. It was a thick sort of an Oldsmobile that had, it was a pretty car for the days. It had a wheel on each, fender on each side, had a chrome ring around that and had a mirror on top of that and it was low slung, close to the ground. Had wire wheels, had a black metal rack on the back, had running boards on it. It had a convertible top. The windshield itself was only about eight inches tall, and when you sit into it, the seat was sitting right on the floor. I got into it and I drove back into camp. Had to hide it up in the woods before we got into camp, because if the lieutenant'd seen it, you had to get out of camp, if you owned an automobile. So I hid it up the road from camp about two miles, then I'd walk into camp. About a week or two later, Daffenbaugh got at me one day and he come to me and he said, "Will you take me home tonight?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, tell you the truth, ( ), I'm married, I got a little girl." He said, "I've rented a little two room cabin." It was nothing but two rooms, side by side, about 12 by 24 feet long, and it wasn't finished off inside or nothing, no bathroom, no nothing. Well, anyway, he was going to bring this little girl to live in that, so he could go be with her at night. Pay somebody else, and they would sleep in your bed for you, so when they come by and have bed count, and be sure the right amount of people in camp was there. Well, some of these times, he had time off and sometimes they did. We got together and I went over and ( ) with him, we picked the little girl up and brought her back. She was only about 16 years old. And he brought her and put her in this little cabin about five miles from camp. I'd take him down there some nights to see her and he would buy gasoline for me. Or we'd take the gasoline out of the, where we had to clean our paint. They'd give us five gallons of gasoline each week to clean the paint brushes. And if you take gasoline after cleaning the paint brushes, and let it sit in a can, the paint will settle to the bottom and the gas will lay

on the top. So what you can do, we would take three buckets, three one gallon buckets, and wash the brushes in one first, then another one, then the other one. Well, instead of pouring all three gallons of gasoline out, we would take the last one we washed and put that for the second one and then ( ) the second one for the third one. And that's how we'd wash them out. We'd start with the dirtiest one, then the cleaner one, then the real clean one to get the brush clean. And that way we could take the five gallons of gasoline and do with it [what] we could [do with] fifteen [gallons]. So what we would do, we would take the extra gasoline and dump it in the car and then use the old gasoline to clean the brushes with.

[tapes stops, starts in mid-sentence] . . . boy from Yorktown, Virginia. I lived in Hampton at the time. And this boy was deaf and dumb, but he come into camp. And we could talk to him because he taught us how to sign language by making letters with your hands. I could go from A to Z with both hands, that's the only way I could talk to him. And you had to spell the words out. But anyway, he was a sign painter, but he couldn't read and write. So one of the time they told him, said go down there and put "Paint Shop" on the paint shop, where we had the paint shop. So he came down to the paint shop and he made a motion for the boy and then told the boy that he wanted him to write down "Paint Shop" on a piece of paper for him so he could paint it on the paint shop. And the little boy looked at him and he said yes, he'd write it down for him. So he wrote it down and the boy, he could tell and write the letters after you wrote them down, but he didn't know what they were. So the little boy wrote "Shit House" on a piece of paper and give it to him and the fellow went up there and painted "Shit House" on the paint shop. The lieutenant found it out and asked who done it and they said he did. He throwed a fit. Something about the boy, he couldn't talk but he could mumble. And when he mumbled, it sounded just like he'd say "Rabbit ( )." And for about 15 minutes, that's all he did, was run around and yell and screaming that out. And finally we took paint and painted

over it and then give him the right sign to write back up there, and he painted the "Paint Shop" back up there for us.

When we were in camp a while, they were feeding us eggs that came in these big barrels, 55 gallon barrels in a brine. They were boiled eggs. And they were in these barrels and the barrels was about 2½ inches thick, they were oak barrels. And somebody looked at one one day and I actually saw it with my own eyes. It said on the barrels, "Processed in 1916." And the word got around, whether it was true or not, I don't know, but the word got around that the food that they were feeding us were packed in ice caves up in Greenland and the government was taking them out. They had them in Greenland for World War I and they were left over. And just like I said, I don't know whether this was true or not, but I did see the "Processed in 1916" on the barrel. And the paper took it up and put something in the paper about it. But from then on, we never got those eggs any more. There wasn't anything wrong with the eggs, I ate quite a few of them. I mean, I like boiled eggs and I would eat them. But the only difference that I could see, around the yolk of the egg there was a slightly green tint, between the yolk and the white. It wasn't bad, but it was slightly green around there, and other than that, you couldn't tell it from an ordinary egg.

We had one boy in camp that when in the summer when it was warm, he would always lay in the bed and not put any clothes on. And I don't know what he, he was trying to show by doing this, but he'd lay in the bed naked all night long. So they got together one night and got a gallon of molasses and he was laying in the bed and they took this gallon of molasses and poured it from head to foot all over his body. And we were all peeping out the covers, watching, acting like we were asleep. And he was slapping his body in the molasses. And it was warm, I guess that made it more sticky. But anyways, he was slapping, slapping, finally he'd seen what had happened. He jumped up and went to the bathhouse and took a bath to wash it off. He come back and cleaned his bed up.

Thought that was a big deal and we all night got a big laugh out of it. Oh, and he didn't sleep that way in the bed.

I decided one weekend to go home, so three or four of the boys that lived in Richmond, each one said they'd give me five dollars apiece. It was five of them and I made six. So that would give me $25 to take them to Richmond and bring them back. So we all got together, got in the car and went to Richmond. I let them off, then I drove on down to Hampton when I lived there. This was Friday night. Saturday I run around all day, I didn't get much sleep Friday night. Saturday night I went down Buffalo Beach and then run around half the rest of the night and I got very little sleep. So the next day, I got ready about 3:00 and start heading up towards Richmond to pick the boys up. I got up to Richmond, I picked them up, and then we got in the car and we started driving. And I got real sleepy and I told one of them to go ahead and drive, but none of them had a driver's permit. So I had to do all the driving. We had driven all the way up to Roanoke and went on through Catawba Mountain and went into New Castle. It wasn't ( ) about eight, ten miles from camp. But I went through New Castle, you made a sharp turn on a steel bridge and that's the last thing I remember. I don't remember going down probably about three blocks and then you had to make a left hand turn and go back out towards ( ). But I didn't make that turn where I was asleep and I run off a bank there about eight foot tall. The car turned over on it's side and hit a pile of telephone poles about 40 foot long. Slid from one end of the poles to the other end and then dropped off the other end about five foot to the ground, the car dropped, and when it did, it tore the whole side off. It was a tight car and the door would open from the front which they call suicide doors in those days. ( ) it hooked on the poles, and when it did, it ripped the door off, plus the side next to the, where the rumble seat, it had a rumble seat into it. Three of the boys was in the rumble seat, and three of us was in the front. Farmer was in the rumble seat, and he, they had a blanket over the top of their heads to keep warm.

And the first thing he said, "What in the hell is going on?" And then when he looked and saw the whole side of the car gone, I think that all three of them was just about ready to faint. There were glass, about the thickness of the glass, square, and about two inches long, that it went in my lip about a half inch, and I pulled that out, spit the blood out, and put my lip over the other lip and held it tight to keep from bleeding and I asked anybody else if they were hurt. Well, we had one fellow there, his name was Fence. And he was just a nervous wreck and we thought he was sick. And we tried to do all we could for him and finally when the car went off of the poles, it uprighted itself.

[tape stops, then starts again] Well, all six still in the car and hadn't fell out. Three of them's in the rumble seat and us three was in the front. And that's when we got to asking anybody if anybody was hurt. Well, Fence was sitting over there near the side where the car was tore up the worst. So we thought he was hurt. The three in the rumble seat had a blanket over their heads, so they didn't even know what was going on. And finally Farmer stuck his head out from under the cover, hollered, "What the hell is going on?" And then we told him what had happened. And when he looked and saw the side of the car, we thought the three in the rumble seat was going to faint.

We got out of the car and looked around and seen what had happened. So finally I got back in the car and I started the motor and the motor run good and everything seemed like it was alright. So we took the part that had got torn off, and put it on a rack on the back of the car, and tied it on the rack, and we all got back in the car and started into town. Well, Fence was the worst one. He was sitting on the outside, next to where the door came off, and David Spain was sitting in the middle, and I was doing the driving. We started back into camp, and when we got to a place about a mile and a half, two miles down the road, we went across the railroad track. And the first thing I know, Spain hollers out and he grabbed his shoulder and I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "My shoulder's hurting terrible." I said, "Well, the only thing I can do is get you in the camp as quick as I can, and

let you see the doctor." By the time we got into camp, his pain had eased up and he wasn't hurting, so we drove on into camp and then we all went to bed. This is about 3:00 in the morning. So about 5 or 6:00 in the morning, the pain got hurting him again and he went up to see the doctor. And it had snowed, there was a little bit of ice on the ground. So the doctor asked him what happened and that's what they always did, the boys all stuck up for each other. He said he slipped on the back step and fell out and hit a rock and hit his shoulder on it. That afternoon, when we got back in camp from going to work, he wasn't there. We asked around to see what happened. Somebody said his shoulder was so bad, they had to send him in to Walter Reed Hospital. And he stayed in there about three months. The lieutenant was going around camp, trying to find out, you know, if he'd hurt it any other way, and he asked all the boys if anybody knew anything about what happened to him, they'd like to know. Well, nobody said nothing. The boys was that way in camp, they would sure stick up for each other. So he stayed in there, and he finally came home after three months.

[tape stops, restarts in mid-sentence] . . . old car and one of the mountaineers wanted to buy it. I told him I'd sell it to him for $35. So I sold him the car for $35 and he took it, and being a mountaineer, ( ) good in working in wood. The cars in those days had wood framework into them and they had sheet metal on top of it. So he took it all out and he straightened it all out and put it back on there, and you couldn't tell it when he got through. He got it all done except the top and said he didn't know how to make a top. And so I told him, I said, "Well, I can use a sewing machine," I said, "you have a sewing machine?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, come down here Saturday and pick me up and bring me down there and I'll, if you've still got the old top, if you hadn't burned it," I said, "I can use the old top and make you a new top." So he got some canvas and we took it, the, I went down there with him one Saturday and I took the old top and took the stitches out of it, took it apart. He cut the new pieces and marked it all with a piece of soapstone, we call it. It looked

like stone, but it was like soap, it would make a mark. And we marked the top all out, cut it out and sewed it on. And we put it back on and the car looked just like it did before. It had Eisenglas in the back, so that didn't break; it wasn't glass like it is today. It was more or less like a plastic, but they call it Eisenglas. He got it all fixed up and he got it fixed up, it looked just as good as it did before. Well, the man had never taken my license off, and never put it in his name. So, it wasn't long after that he come back down in camp one day and want to know if I want to buy it back. And I said, "Why is that?" He said, well, some reason he needed the money. I said, "Well, what do you want for it?" And he said, "Well, if you'll give me the $35 that I gave you," he says, "I haven't even changed the title," he says, "you can go ahead and take it back." So I give him his $35 back and I got my car back.

[tape stops, starts again in mid-sentence] . . . any of them said, well, they wasn't going to ride with me any more but they were scared to ride. I told them, I said, "If I get some sleep, it wouldn't hurt anything, but I just can't drive on ( )." I said, "I thought one of y'all would do the driving." So ( ) went home that weekend, and David Spain bought a 1929 Trimmer, four door sedan. And they stayed that weekend, and he was like I was. 'Cause they just came from Richmond.

END SIDE A

START SIDE B

But he left Richmond and started coming up to get to Roanoke and after he got to Roanoke, he went across Catawba Mountain and started coming back in camp that way. And when he got down there, he fell asleep. And when he did, I don't what in the world happened or what saved them, but he run off the side of the road. And in those days, they didn't have steel guard rails like they got

now. They would have a four by four post and nail two by sixes on it. And if you hit one of them things with any speed, it just flew up in the air like match sticks and that was it. But one of the two by sixes that was from forming the guard rail, went through the radiator and came underside the hood. Another one went up in through the windshield, hit the rear view mirror, and came out the back door. And the other one, I think it was three or four, one more went in the, where the windshield come some way, and come out a side window. So, I was in the bed sleeping about 2:00 in the morning, 3:00 in the morning and here comes somebody shaking me, says, "Albert, get up." I says, "What's the matter?" He said, "We done had a wreck." And said, "We just got in camp, and we got to get that car away from there." Said, "Neither one of us got a driver's license; before the law gets there." I said, "Well, where are you at?" He told me where he was at, about eight miles we had to go to New Castle, and about four or five miles the other side of there. So I went over there. The only way to get to his car was go through a man's driveway and then drive down his cornfield. Because the corn had all been cut, so it wouldn't hurt anything to drive on it. So I told them, I said, "The stubble is ( ), if I get stuck, you all are going to have to shovel me out." So we went down there, and pulled the two by sixes out of the car. He got a heavy chain and hooked his car to mine. And I turned around and pulled it back into camp.

[tape stops, restarts in mid-sentence] . . . time to check in for the morning without being late for work. The other boys, one of them was, we called him Dumpy, he was real fat. Short, and his name was Farmer. So they all got together and said they weren't going to ride with him any more. They came back, and the next time they wanted to go to Richmond, they rode with me. But the next time I went home, I made sure that I got my sleep at night, before I left to go the next day. I stayed in camp a good while, I was in camp all together twenty-three months. But I went home one time, I started having problems with my car. So I swapped that and got me a '33 [Ford] Fairlane four door

sedan. And was using that to go back and forth. [tape stops, when it restarts, quality is extremely poor] After that, I never broke another one. ( ) got us to build wall lockers for the camp down at Appomattox [Court House], Virginia. And like I said, each one of these things took about 200 lockers. And I forgot exactly how many, but we had to ( ) and it would take us two or three months, the three of us, to build these lockers and put them all together. Then they would come down in their truck and so I told them ( ) I said, "Now, if we build these, this is going to be the end of it." I said, "Those boys should have learned like we did how to make them. And we'll be glad to go down and spend a week in their camp and show them how to make the lockers. But after that, they're on their own and have to build their own." I said, "I'm not building any more after this bunch." It went on ( ) after that, and they came back and told us they wanted us to build some more. I said, "Look, just send me ( ) any thing you want. I'll go back out on the road with the men. ( ) I don't want to build any more lockers." I said, ( ). So anyway, from then on, I was sent out to the ( ) to work.

( ) in camp each day, we had a half an hour to get, like we couldn't go in the mess hall and eat without dressing. ( ) half an hour to get our clothes off. So we were supposed to go to work at 7:30, 8:30, I forgot exactly now. But ( ) 30 minutes early at 12:00, which would be 11:30, so we could go change our clothes and get our uniform on, before we could eat lunch. Around, in the afternoon, after you ate lunch, you had an hour for lunch and then you had another half hour to get undressed and go to work. Then in the other afternoon, although the other boys didn't get into camp until 5:00, you got off at 3:30 so you could get dressed and get in the uniform for supper.

( ) one of the things we did, they brought deer in ( ). The deer would be in crates. ( ) take the crate out in the ( ) mountainous area on the side of the road, we'd take the crate off the truck. ( ) turn the deer loose. The deer would look at you real funny at first, and then move around

a little bit, and finally he'd take off down the ( ) and all you could see was that white tail, flapping in the breeze. He'd be heading ( ).

( ) great big trucks, like gasoline trucks, and they were filled with fish and water. And they'd give us a five gallon milk can or ten gallon, I forgot what they were, but a regular milk can. And we would open the valves and let these fish and water go into these cans. And we'd fill them about half full of water and fish, walked along the side of the stream and then we'd go in the stream and we'd take about a half a bucket of water and pour it in the container we had the fish in, the milk cans, and then we'd take another half a bucket and gradually add it to it. It'd take about 15 minutes to, ( ) up to 30 minutes to put this water in to change the temperature so that it wouldn't ( ) shock if you put them in there all at once, they'd probably die of shock.

They would get the fish from a fish hatchery up in Newport, Virginia, I think it was. Up there ( ) New Castle. And they'd bring the deer from somewhere up north and they would bring beaver in, and different animals to turn loose, and to put in the woods, to get the population back up again, ( ).

While I was in CC camp, in this camp, I got a first aid card. And one day while we were at the camp, they ( ) somebody, young girl about 15, 16 years old, come in and told us, well, the deer we had turned loose on top, ( ) I believe it was, ( ) or somebody. But anyway, we got in the truck and we went down to ( ) that was behind our camp. We went down to where the ( ) was. ( ) this deer was tied to the fence, and the man was over there bleeding. The deer had gouged him in the leg and tore his leg up right bad. They, the deer was tied to the fence and we asked him what had happened. He said, well, the deer come out

( ) and he had to tie him to the fence. But ( ) was, he was trying to tie that deer, lasso that deer ( ) to kill him. And that was the reason the deer attacked him. We cut the deer loose, the deer took

off. And we carried him to the hospital in Roanoke.

( ) we'd play on the boys, especially the new boys when they'd come in camp, ( ) this man had two daughters, one was about 18 or 19 years old, one was about 16. And they'd call it ( ) and one of these fellows was going with one of the girls, the oldest one. And he told us, said, "Now, look, you want to come with me." Said, "We'll take you down to this house and we'll all go ( )." And what they would do, the boy would go to the house with him, and he would tell them, said, "Now look, ( ) daddy's a brake man on the railway, but he leaves," and says, "He's gone for a week or two at a time." And he said, "If he's not home," said, "it's alright to go with us, but he doesn't want anybody to go with her if ( ) young as she is, if he'd there. But he's away this week. And so if he does happen to be there," said, "we'll just run and leave." So two of them left, they was going to see the girls. And when they got down to the house, just as I had planned ahead of time. When they walked up to the door, he knocked on the door and these two girls came to the door. The youngest one was a right pretty girl, both of them was pretty, but this man that was supposed to be their daddy, which wasn't, it was just a ( ) [L.E.M.? Local Employed Man?] in camp, with a shot gun around behind the house. And they had told this boy ahead of time, says, "Now, look, he's got a shot gun, says, he'll kill you. So ( ) happens to be there," says, "the only thing you can do is run," says, "no use pleading with him." And what they would do, they would stand on the front porch and just about that time this boy would jump out from the shadow of the ( ) "I told you not to go with my daughters!" Said, "I'm going to kill you!" And he'd take the shot gun and shoot in the air. ( ) running down the river and they'd really take off running. Some of them that they'd take down there would get so scared, they'd die right in their tracks and they wouldn't move. And they would all laugh about it.

When I was in camp this time, I was at New Castle [for a] shivaree ( ). And what they

would do, when a man and a girl would get married, well, that night they'd let them get in the bed. About 12 or 1:00 in the morning, they would all go to the house with pots and pans and anything that can make a racket, and beat it all in the back yard until they come to the door. Well, we'd make them give us ice cream and cake. If they didn't have ice cream and cake, we'd take the man and put him in the car and hold him down or tie him up or what we had to do, and carry him up in the woods about five miles and take his shoes off and make him walk back to his house. But in this particular case, they had ice cream and cake waiting for us, so they gave us the ice cream and cake and then we left and went back to camp.

When I went out on the road to work, the first time after leaving the cabinet shop, I went to Pott's Mountain. And we, first we cut right of way for the telephone and light line, from one side of Pott's Mountain to the other. We had to cut all the brush off, and took the big brush and bring it back to the edge of the, where the woodland was, and chop it up in pieces and leave the small brush just around it in the right of way. We were to cut from one side to the other. Then the next thing we had to do was make a road to go over the mountain. And to make this road, we had to make what they called then a switchback. And a switchback would be, you'd go up to the side of the mountain, and then make a 180° turn, and come back in the opposite direction. And what they would do, they had bulldozers there, this particular place. The

( ) rocks wasn't solid rock, it was just more or less dirt and gravel-like mixed. And they'd take the bulldozer and shove a space big enough to get up there and work. And then we'd go there with mattocks and shovels and picks and pick all the dirt out, put it in wheel barrows and

carry it to the other side of the road and shove it over until we got about, a road about 15 foot wide. Every time you come to a switchback, you'd blow your horn. And if the man on the other side of the

switchback blew his horn, they had what we called cut-outs, where you'd made a spot big enough to park a car in. And if you heard a horn blowing, if you were going up the hill, you'd always pull over to one side and let the man coming down the hill pass you.

This bulldozer they had to work on this lot was a big, heavy piece of machinery. And what they had done, they had taken another one of the CC trucks and took a transmission out of another one and put two transmissions in a line to gear down to pull this load. And they could take this thing and back the trailer part of it back into a creek and back it up against a bank and then run the bulldozer up on it and then pull out with this two transmissions. It was geared down so low, they had a throttle on cars in those days, it was on the dash, that you pull out for the speed of the car, or truck or whatever you was driving. Originally they had them on the steering wheel. But they had these on the floor and they had one on the dash, too, that you could pull out. And you could put that in both transmissions in low gear and pull the throttle all the way out and you could walk down the road as fast as the truck would move. But they had to do that to get the power to pull this bulldozer on this big trailer.

We had one boy in camp that must have been about six foot, five inches tall that we called High Pockets. And we would put the younger boys up to go ask him, say, "How's the weather up there?" And they'd go and they'd have to look up to him, where he was so tall, and say, "How's the weather up there?" He said, "I got a telephone up my tail," says, "if you want to call up," says, "if you want to call up, you can find out."

This camp, after we'd go to work ( ) riding home in the back, they'd always sing little different songs. And one of the songs they would sing, "Another day, another dollar, and another day less of this damn holler."

We got together one time and ( ) up a little pond behind where the kitchen was, and put us

some trout into it. And they were just small trout, maybe four inches, three inches long that we caught down in the stream. And we fixed ( ) so they couldn't get out. And we kept them in that, every day we'd throw bread or some type of food so that they'd eat. And when they got just about big enough to eat, about 14 inches long, the lieutenant come down there one day and turned them loose and they went down in the Craig Creek where the water was deeper. The stream run into Craig Creek. And we had a swimming hole down there so they, the fish went in there. And that afternoon, all the boys was out there with their lines, trying to see if they could catch the fish.

We had a swimming hole down from camp about a half a, maybe a city block from where the supply house was. And we'd go down there when we'd come in from work, in just, in our shorts or underwear, we'd dive in and take a bath. The pool must have been about nine, ten, fifteen foot deep and must have been about 40 feet long and 30 feet wide. It had a rock cliff up on one side. It must have been about 25 feet tall. So they were all getting up on the rock cliff, diving off, and then daring the others to do it. So I got up on the top of the cliffs and dove off and I turned just enough at the bottom of the rocks, the bottom of the streams and the rocks that I have scars on my body and they were still there quite a few years later.

Later on, we went right into camp, right on the side of where our camp was, behind one of the barracks, and took the bulldozer and shoved big rocks in the stream. And after we got the big rocks in there, we put smaller ones ( ) and put them in place and dammed up a little place. They would take smaller rocks and chink in the cracks. It had a lot of leaks in it but it still did the trick and held the water back. We had a pond there probably 40, 50 feet long and about 30 feet wide, about 9 foot deep.

In camp, they were teaching safety and they showed us pictures of boys who actually got killed. And they were showing them to the men and a still picture ( ) to try to get them not to do

the same thing again. One of the boys had a jack and in a truck ( ) how to put the jack up. He told the boys, said, "You watch my hand," and said "when I raise my hand up above the hood and raise it, and wave it for you to come ahead," he says, "you come ahead." Well, when they did, the jack slipped and the boy got in between the building it was next to and the truck. And so what he did, he kept waving for the boy to back up. The boy thought he was waving for him to come ahead and took the truck and just kept coming 'til they killed him.

Another boy, this camp was in Hinton, West Virginia, he had a load of dirt and when he went to dump the dirt, he forgot to pull the tailgate where it was, unlatch and let the dirt out the back. So when he raised it up in the air, the dirt was still in the truck. So while he was in the truck, trying to get it down, couldn't get it down, he got out and somehow, not thinking or not knowing what he was doing, he went where the ( ) was and took a plug out to try to get it down. And when he pulled the plug loose, the plug blew out the load of dirt and the body came down and caught his head between the scissors part of the dump, the chassis on the truck and the piece of steel that was under the body of the dump truck. It mashed his head flat. Blood was everywhere. I actually saw pictures of these, that one of the boys that was in camp at the time had taken of.

One thing I forgot while I was going on this, was when me and the little boy was on the bridge, and just before the taxi stopped, he was telling me how bad off they were and they didn't have anything and I just told him, I said, "Look, I got $3. And what I'll do is give you a dollar and a half and I'll take a dollar and a half." And then later on the taxi cab stopped and picked us up. I'll add that in when I change it.

END OF TAPE

Recollections II

by

ALBERT J. "A. J." WILLETT

Transcribed by: Joy K. Stiles

Shenandoah National Park

Luray, Virginia

Original manuscript on deposit at
Shenandoah National Park Archives

INDEX

Recollections II

by

ALBERT J. "A. J." WILLETT

Transcribed by: Joy K. Stiles

Shenandoah National Park
Luray, Virginia

Original manuscript on deposit at
Shenandoah National Park Archives

INDEX

Side A:

Albert "A.J." Willett is a former Civilian Conservation Corps enrollee. He was initially assigned to Shenandoah National Park from June, 1935 to April, 1937. This tape is Willett's memories from his second enrollment, when he was assigned to a CCC camp near New Castle, Virginia, west of Roanoke. Willett was at this camp for 23 months.

Willett describes the physical layout of the camp, then tells how he received his first assignment in the carpenter's shop. He tells of some of his carpenter duties, then describes a job the men had laying pipe from a spring to a civilian's home to replace his water supply which had been polluted when the CCC introduced beaver into a pond near his home.

Willett talks about some specific individuals he recalls from camp. He then relates an incident when a truck load of enrollees went into Roanoke one Saturday night and on the way back to camp, met a car on a one lane bridge. Willett recalls when the camp latrine blew up with an enrollee inside, and a few other stories about individuals, including an enrollee who was hurt in the barracks fighting with another enrollee. When the lieutenant questioned how the boy had been hurt, he was told the boy had fallen over one of the wooden lockers that were at the foot of each man's bed. The lieutenant had Willett and others in the carpenter shop make 200 wall lockers to replace all the foot lockers in the camp. They were then told to make another 200 wall lockers for another camp that wanted them.

Willett remembers hitchhiking home and buying a car for $65. When he returned to camp, he had to hide the car two miles away, as enrollees were forbidden to have cars. He tells how he got some gas for his car by using gasoline they were given to clean paint brushes in the carpenter shop.

Willett recalls more stories about incidents from camp, including one involving a deaf-mute enrollee, camp food, and a trick played on another enrollee. He describes an accident he had while driving 5 other boys back to camp one night. His car was damaged badly enough that he sold it to a mountaineer for $35. Mountaineer repaired the car and later sold it back to Willett for $35.

Side B:

Willett then tells of another car accident a friend of his had.

When the carpentry crew had to make another 200 lockers for yet another CCC camp, Willett vowed he would not make any more. So when they were told to make still more, Willett left the carpentry shop and went out on a road crew. He describes relocating deer and restocking streams with fish. He relates a few more stories about life in and around camp, then tells about putting in a road over Pott's Mountain. After a few more stories, Willett tells of a camp safety course and viewing photographs of CCC boys killed in work accidents.

The tape ends abruptly.

End of interview.

Key words: