

Interview with James Nostrant
Marquette, Michigan
CCC Camps
7 June 1982

START OF INTERVIEW

Russel Magnaghi (RM): Interview with James Nostrant, Marquette, Michigan June 7, 1982.
Okay Jim, could you tell us a little bit about your days in the Civilian Conservation Corps camps up here?

James Nostrant (JN): Well when I went in, it was made up for, primarily for boys that didn't have jobs and things like that. They were for us that were on the out and couldn't find jobs at that time; it was Roosevelt that was the one that started them. And I couldn't get a job so I went down to the station and signed up.

RM: Let me just back track here, where were you living at that time?

JN: I was living in Big Rapids at that time. Big Rapids, Michigan. I signed up from there, got on a train, and I think they took me to Trout Lake first. Well I know they took me to Trout Lake first. From there I went up to the Skan on the next train up, or trucks pardon me, from Trout Lake we took trucks. We were in the camp _____. We started out there, it was just, during the day we was under the forestry and while we were in camp in the evening when they brought us in we were under the army. Not that we had any drills or anything, but we had mess halls and reveille, and latrines, stuff like that.

RM: Now could you describe the camp, the physical layout of the camp?

JN: Well the camp was in a kind of a circle. And everything was collaborating in there with the flag pole stuff in the center. The barracks, I think they had, I think there were 5 or 6 barracks. It's a long time ago, it was almost 40 years ago. But they had, I think there were 4 barracks, a mess hall, a rec room, and a chapel. And we were stations there. And now any activities from there, we were centered around, usually we were taken to the rec hall when the details were laid out for the day's work, we were briefed there and then we went out and did whatever jobs we had. The jobs consisted of everything from timbering to road building, tree planting.

RM: Did you do a lot of that?

JN: We did a lot of reforestry.

RM: Where did you work?

JN: Well we went anywhere from Whitefish Bay, our area was, down to Germfask I think it was, in that area there. It consisted of quite a wide area. There were a lot of other CCC camps I guess in the Upper Peninsula at that time too, but ours was the one in that area.

RM: Now what was life like in the camp, say when you were in the morning, what was a typical day?

JN: Well a typical day, you got up at reveille, we'd go and have reveille. Then you had a roll call, then we were turned over to forestry. Where we had our meals, which was in the mess hall, and whatever activities. Wherever we'd go from there I think it was to the rec hall where they briefed us on what were supposed to do today, that day. If we were to plant trees, we were shown how to do it because when all those fellows, when they were sent up they were very green, most of them were from the city. So they'd show us how to do that. In those days they didn't use machinery, you used what they'd call like a spud. You jam it into the ground, push it aside then set your tree and then stamp it in. That was all you did to it. There'd be quite a few boys, I don't remember how many we had in there but we'd have a couple of loads of army vehicles they had, army trucks or National Guard trucks whichever ones they used. And we'd take our, I think they got their brief from the Agriculture Department up there someplace. Most of them that we planted were jack pines and Norway pines. Very similar to the white pine that we grow at that time. And then we'd also consisted of, we'd have telephone lines to run. So they'd cut telephone poles and mark them with these draw knives and we'd let them dry well, and they'd put butt ends of them that was going into the ground. While we were there I know we laid at least ten miles of telephone wire. And we also built roads, they had some tractors and we had lots of men with shovels just like in some of the prison camps [laughter] even though it wasn't like that. We enjoyed it very much, the majority of fellows once they got, liked it very well. Then we built a bridge near the Tahquamenon Falls. Now I don't think it was near the falls itself but it was back from there. We had a ranger station we built and a fire tower also.

RM: Now were they, the men weren't trained. So like how did they have training for bridge building?

JN: You see they had men come in that was doing that work and you'd work with them. They were the engineers. Like if you was going to build a bridge you had men that would come in that knew what they were doing and you would help. You got the timbers ready and the supplies, whatever they needed. In those days they used very little nails and spikes it was all notched timbers and stuff for our bridges, they were all wood. It went the same way for telephones lines, and your fellows that do carpentry would do that work. You just helped getting the stuff prepared and they showed you how it's done and you went ahead and followed their instructions. They were trained for that. It was the same way, the army would do the same thing once you were trained for it. Once you learned your job and were pretty good it, most would surprise you how quick they took to it.

RM: How long were you in this camp? What were the years?

JN: Let's see, I went in in '39 but I think I was out in '40. Well the end of '40 I came out. I spent about a year.

RM: Is that a typical tour?

JN: I don't know but that's what I spent. It was about a year and you either resigned over, or if you had a chance at job which I did, I went home. They didn't make you stay any longer if you could go home and have a job.

RM: Now could you leave the camp and return home for a weekend or a trip or something?

JN: No, they may have but I don't think they did. We had, there was not basic training or anything like that. But when I was there I didn't go home. I think I got \$35 or... it was \$30 and I kept 5 of it and the rest was sent home to my parents at that time because I was very young I was turning 16, 17 so. The only time I remember of anybody going home was if there was an illness or something during that year. There might have been some going home for the holidays too. I think you could go if you wanted to but I didn't have much chance to go home. In the winter time up there travel is pretty rough because you were snowed in in the winter time.

RM: Could you discuss a little of that? Describe it? Your impressions of it?

JN; I remember one time we went out along the Whitefish Bay area there with trucks and I don't know whether our antifreeze those days wasn't up to par but, it was 40 degrees below zero and those trucks froze up and boy, that was so surprising. We were headed for Germfask I think that day, and I don't know how we got over to Whitefish Point. We were hauling wood I think and whether we took wood over to that area or brought it back from that area I'm not sure. That's what it was, and they had such blizzards up there that we had to, our buildings were in a circle. They had them in a circle, and in the fall of the year they put ropes between the barracks and the mess hall and the recreation room and the chapel. So that if you were ever caught in a blizzard in any place but your own barracks you could find your way to other buildings without wandering off into the woods because in a blizzard there everything looked alike. It really snowed hard. And the snow, one year we were getting wood out of the woods and after it gets so cold it forms a crust you can almost walk on. But if you happen to break through that, it was so deep there that year some of the guys when they'd go down they'd be looking up at the top of the snow [laughter]. They'd have to pull their way up a tree like you were climbing a tree to get up to the top. They had dozers, bulldozers up there. I don't know if they called them bulldozers or those roller snow blowers were so big we'd have banks along the highways up there that were twenty feet high and just like one solid slab of snow or ice it would almost be, look like, but it was snow! They'd shoot it way up in the air, and those winters are cold. The guys from down in the southern part of Michigan, they're realizing that it really can get that cold. It was something else.

RM: Now how did you deal with mosquitos?

JN: Oh the mosquitos wasn't as bad as, what they called it they have the black flies up there, those little gnats. When you were planting trees, it seems as though that must have been in the spring of the year, because they were so thick and we wore head nets. If you didn't wear head nets they fly in your eyes, in your ears, and up your nose. So you had to have something, they were that thick. They could really bite and sting you good. That was only for a matter of maybe a couple weeks and then they were gone. But we'd combat the deer flies, they were pretty thick up there. The only time you were bothered too much with mosquitos were around water like in the

Tahquamenon Falls area, the lakes and stuff like that. But they'd mostly bother you at night when they would come out.

RM: So you didn't have any kind of insect repellants or anything?

JN: I can't remember many, just...

RM: You'd just wear the nets?

JN: Wear the head nets and like in the evening if you had to do anything you'd wear gloves and a jacket, or something to keep them out. That kept them out pretty good.

RM: So then what was the activity during the winter time?

JN: Mostly cutting wood, and we'd have movies on reforestation, things like that. We were allowed to go into on pass, I think we went into Newberry and just like army passes, went to the movies and things like that.

RM: Now would they drive you in?

JN: Yes, they'd take us in by truck, they'd take us back by truck. You'd go over there and you were allowed to go till a certain time, and you met in a certain area and you were brought back from various areas of town.

RM: So they didn't care what you did while you were in town?

JN: As long as you were dressed the way you should be.

RM: Yeah.

JN: You could go anywhere you wanted.

RM: So you could go to a movie if you wanted to?

JN: Movie if you wanted to, go to for lunch or something. There wasn't too much to do up in those smaller towns, except movies and eat food. Which is really good up there, at least in those days, and a lot of it.

RM: What was in, in terms of the camp itself, what was the food like in the camp?

JN: It wasn't served army style. I think, we didn't have no K rations. Like it was regular meals that were served in the mess hall because we were able to go out and come back in on trucks for food and stuff like that. Through the day, as I said we were under the Civilian Conservation Corps and you knew you were under army command. Not that the strict sense that you had to go out a patrol or anything like that, but you had have railroading taps. You'd stand out in front of the quad, but we never did any of the military work except for, just that, and reveille.

RM: Now did they have any kind of recreation programs?

JN: Yes, we had a baseball team. We had boxing, and they had if I remember they used to have a pool table but I'm not sure now. I think they had one pool table and they'd have pool tournaments with that. Baseball seemed to be the major thing that we had, we formed baseball teams. And of course they had horseshoe pitches and stuff like that, but not, just among the men themselves.

RM: Now did you play other?

JN: Yes we played, well when I was on the baseball team we played other cities or towns that had a city team. We'd play Newberry and Trout Lake and Eckerman, and I think even Germfask had a team at that point. We had about, there were about 5 or 6 league games but then we'd play them two or three times that summer. Of course they could go fishing or you could go on hikes too. There was a lot to do. In the summer we'd go out and pick blueberries in the swamps you know up there, so that was interesting. And we'd go up to, I think they had one logging camp. I think that was outside of Germfask. Or sawmill it was and we could go there and watch them make lumber. When I, after I had been away from there 40 years and came out of the service and came back up there, it was hard to find any of the area. They had all planted and replanted it up, torn down all the buildings I guess because I couldn't find them. I tried to find the area, but I could find Whitefish Bay Point and the tower, or the lighthouse that was up there on the beach. The cities looked the same, pretty much, there wasn't too much change in those cities there. But the area where our camp was I just could not find. It was all replanted, a lot more trees so definitely at some certain time they had torn it down and replanted.

RM: What was your impression of some of the local people around there? You mentioned earlier, French Canadians?

JN: Yeah the French Canadians. They were the kind of the happy go lucky guys, they'd go into town after their work and they raised a little hey. The town people themselves were more or less going about their business and what they had to do. They were very nice to us up there, we couldn't take it out, and they were very nice. Even at certain times if they needed help, if something had to be done where they needed more than one person, the Conservation Corps would volunteer, get volunteers and they'd go handle it. We'd go there just to shovel snow sometimes in a bad area where they couldn't get plows through at times, or in some case we would do that. Because in the winter time there wasn't much you could do up in there in the wintertime except like I said, the recreation hall where they'd brief things for us on things to come in the summer. The past times were hitting the town for recreation. Some boys were training, they did a little boxing too. I used to run with a light heavy weight who was training up there. He was going to start boxing when he left the service. He had boxed some before when he went in. And it was a very interesting year for me because I had never done anything like that before. I think it was a good thing myself, I wish they'd bring that back for some of these younger men that don't have the jobs in the summer. Especially to get them off the streets. Where they don't have the jobs and they get into problems that they could otherwise avoid. I never regretted my year up there, I think it was a good because I didn't have a job. I don't know

just who told me about the CCCs but somebody did because I'd hiked three miles into town that day to get a job. In the morning I'd used, when it was during the Depression there, we'd hike into town. Then we'd hop on those trucks, like A&P trucks, and for stores like that. This day there was just nothing available and some kid had told me about this and we went down there to this place. And they interviewed us, and it sounded good to me. Now the problem at home was it was hard to feed a family, there was 4 children. So I signed up right away. I was gone two weeks before the folks knew where I was at! [Laughter].

RM: [Laughter].

JN: I guess they had thought that I had ran away from home! But it was the better of two evils for them because I was off, it was a hardship for them it was during the Depression.

RM: Now did you have, when you were in the camps, any special clothes or uniform that you wore?

JN: We wore army petites to work, and we had uniforms for dress. But it was an OD uniform, they were cotton or whatever it was at that time. It was not a combat uniform, just a petite uniform that you could use for any duty you had. When we went to town, well we kind of dressed up in khakis and a cap, like an overseers cap would be. You just had the two uniforms.

RM: Did you have any special ceremonies or holidays or anything?

JN: Outside of our regular retreat, if I remember I think let's see I was up there till...September to September. I think we did march in Newberry once, I remember, on Memorial Day I think it was. But it was just like the rest of the parade, well they did take some of the trucks and some guys marched but they didn't have any weapons or anything. I think we had a band, if I remember right. Some guys could play, and I think they had a band at that time. Not a big one but it was, could form _____ and like musical instruments.

RM: So they sort of practiced like, during the winter?

JN: Well yeah, you didn't work every day. I think we had Saturday off, or Sunday. So maybe they'd schedule a concert for the boys that liked instruments. It was a lot, it was so long ago that it's hard to remember unless someone mentions something that freshens my memory up.

RM: How many men were approximately in the camp?

JN: I'd say in our camp there was probably, oh anyways from 175 to 200 men in our camp.

RM: Then who was sort of, who was in charge of the camp? Was there a commander?

JN: There was a commander, I think it was a captain that was in charge of the men in the evening. Then there was a head man, I don't know what they called him in the daytime for the Conservation Corps, then it was turned over to him in the daytime. But I think we had a captain for when we were back in camp. I remember, and there could have been some lieutenants too. I

don't know if they were regular army, they must have been regular army because they were there every evening so they wouldn't be National Guard, so they had to be regular army.

RM: Where there ever any disciplinary problems?

JN: Not that I can remember, there might have been when we first got up there. But we never had to go through any basic things or anything that I know of from the army. Just that he taught us how to form for retreat and how to get up for reveille and things like that. And during the day we were under the forestry and we were told what we had to do and primed for that. Most everybody had, there was some injuries especially when they were barking trees, they would straddle a log and they pulled draw shavings sometimes it would split or cut a piece of bark off and slap you in the knee. Those draw knives were very sharp and they could cut you awful fast. And of course, there was your normal accidents. Cut fingers, sprained ankles, maybe a broken arm or something when someone would fall.

RM: Where would they take care of those accidents?

JN: I think we had a small infirmary there at the base. If it was anything worse than that they were probably taken to Trout Lake or someplace at least where they had a hospital...I can't remember. There must have been a hospital near there. But I can't remember which one of the bigger towns would be, whether Newberry or Trout Lake would have been big enough to have a hospital at that time. There wouldn't be a very big one, because that was a long time ago and we didn't have the big, all the stuff they have now. It had to be either Trout Lake or Eckerman probably. Of course then we have the small infirmary.

RM: Do you remember the, an Indian CCC camp up there?

JN: I've hear of it, but I can't remember it. I don't know just what area it was in even, but I know there were other CCC camps up there in that area. In fact there were probably 5 or 6 around that area. Not around our area but strung out through the belt. But I knew they did have some Indians up in there in a camp. I just don't remember.

RM: How would you evaluate, say you mentioned what you thought of your time spent. What did you think of the work that was carried out in terms of things accomplished by the CCC?

JN: I think it was very good, especially the reforestation. That was I think a very good thing because we needed that at that time, we were using actually more timber than we were putting back. Like your roads they were helpful, although they never were paved roads. They were mostly just leveled and graveled maybe. And some of them wasn't even that, we'd lay like it was a swamp areas we'd cut poles and it'd be what they used to call a corduroy roads and logs crossed the road every so often and cover them with dirt, or whatever they had at the time. The telephone lines were very constructive I think, because they needed them. Especially for the ranger stations and their fire towers. I don't think we've done anything outside of the area except for like in parks, and for the state and the government. Not much for the city or the towns, I don't know why it was like that.

RM: So you think the government got its money's worth?

JN: I think very much so, more than just by left home and put on welfare. At that time what did they call that, the deal where they...that deal where they? Well I guess it was a welfare sort of.

RM: The Dole?

JN: They'd dole out rations and stuff like that. So this way they earned their keep and they were able to send a little money home to their folks if they have to. If they didn't then it was their own.

RM: Did you find that that was enough money to keep you going a month?

JN: Well, I'd probably like more [laughter], but \$5 went quite a ways in those days. I mean a lot of our money was kept for us, if our folks didn't need it then they would keep it for you and sent back up. But they did use it if they needed it.

RM: Did you serve in World War 2?

JN: World War 2 in the South Pacific.

RM: Did you find that the training that you got during this CCC experience was somewhat helpful? At least the discipline, the regimentation?

JN: The discipline yes, I think it was. There was never any real strict training. But there was rules set up where you had to report for reveille, you had to report for retreat. And if they needed you for marches and stuff you had to be there, you had to go. And if you didn't volunteer so many men were picked just like in the army. You had to go. I don't think it hurt, I think it was good for the men. Because when you came up, you had little idea, if you ever did have to go into the service what you'd be headed for. They did tell us about, I remember at the time Hoover, not Hoover pardon me. Roosevelt would tell us that we should start arming. And of course people said that there would be no war and they'd give us lectures on things like that about what could happen. Not that there was going to be, they thought there wouldn't be no war. It helped, just I think very much. Not to the extent if you that if you were fighting it would help you, because you had to go through altogether different training for combat. Because I ended up in the infantry, but I ended up in communications so it wasn't quite as bad as some of us. Well I was up there I enjoyed very much the beautiful country. I think it was the cleanest air and the cleanest country! [Laughter]. From the stand point of the way pollution is now in our cities right, it was just something out of this world to be up there. The winters are cruel, nature is a cruel animal if she wants to be, but she can also be just the opposite. But I never regretted a day that I spent up there. It was unbelievable. I think we should have it nowadays, especially at this time when we have so many people out of work.

RM: So many things like that that could be done.

JN: That's another thing, so much could be done up there even for the parks they have now. They could make them much better if they had men doing that work. And it would save the state a lot of tax money I think in the sense that they could get this done a lot cheaper than having a contract. Probably wouldn't set good with the contractors but it sure helps the people that pay taxes!

RM: Okay, well good!

END OF INTERVIEW