

John B. Adams
Zion National Park Oral History Project
CCC Reunion
September 29, 1989

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Don Graff: Okay this is Don Graff and right now I'm interviewing John B. Adams, it's about, what time is it? It must be about one o'clock.

John Adams: One o' five

Don Graff: One o' five in the afternoon and we're at the Nature Center, September 29th, 1989. Well John let's just start off, where are you from?

John Adams: I was born in Paragonah, Utah

Don Graff: Yes.

John Adams: 1914, December the 14th, 1914

Don Graff: Is that where you were living when you joined the C's?

John Adams: Yes

Don Graff: Were your folks ranchers, farmers?

John Adams: Well, I lived with a foster family.

Don Graff: Yes.

John Adams: My parents died earlier in the flu in 1917

Don Graff: Yes, in the flu epidemic.

John Adams: I was taken in by a foster family and raised until I was about fourteen and then I went on my own from there. And I joined the CC's, it must have been in '33 because first I was in Cedar City, PE-222.

Don Graff: That was the first camp you were in then?

John Adams: Yes, that must have been in '33.

Don Graff: Oh I'm sure, yes.

John Adams: From there I went to Duck Creek, and then from there I went over to Enterprise [Escalante?], and we helped build the skyline bridge there and along the Devil's Backbone.

Don Graff: Yes.

Adams: And then built a road down into Boulder, out of solid sandstone rock, and then from there we transferred to Zion National Park.

Graff: So when did you arrive here in Zion, probably '34?

Adams: It was '34, yes.

Graff: Which camp were you in?

Adams: I was in the camp across the river

Graff: On the east side of the river?

Adams: Yes

Graff: In NP4, or whatever they call it?

Adams: Sometimes they called it NP4, and then next time maybe, NP2.

Graff: Bridge Mountain camp, they called it?

Adams: Yes, and sometimes it's NP3.

Graff: What got you interested in the three C's? How did you hear about it or what?

Adams: Well I was first contacted by a fellow, one of my neighbors, told me about the three C's. There was no money to be made or everybody was poorer than church mice.

Graff: Right.

Adams: He said that was a good place to go to get a start of something, and so that's why I decided to go and signed up in Cedar City and take the physical exams.

Graff: When they paid you for thirty dollars a month and you kept five, did they send the other to your foster family?

Adams: No, it was sent to my sister.

Graff: Oh yes, you had an older sister then?

Adams: Yes, that was Bernice. Her name was Hardy.

Graff: She was married already?

Adams: No, but she was my half-sister.

Graff: Oh I see.

Adams: We was all split. Then she married a Bulloch, Leonard Bulloch, in Cedar City. We had a house there in Paragonah. I and my sister lived there with a woman, and then I joined the CC's, and was transferred to different places. It didn't seem like they'd keep the bunch of us Paragonah boys together very long which was kind of tough.

Graff: They wanted to move you around?

Adams: Yes, so I landed here [Zion NP]. The first winter I spent on the switch back, the farthest switch back.

Graff: Picking rocks?

Adams: Picking rocks

Graff: Yes.

Adams: That one picture that you see there, I don't know any of the guys there, I don't remember them.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: But that's where I was that first winter.

Graff: Yes, the figures are pretty small and it's hard to pick somebody out.

Adams: Yes, and that was pretty cold.

Graff: Yes, I bet.

Adams: So, when I got sick, and I thought I had pneumonia there one time. I laid out for about three days and then slowly got over it and went back to work. I thought, well that'll be the end of that. I'm going to try and look for a different job. So I heard they needed somebody up here at the museum and that when it comes summer. And I was kind of wanting to get into truck driving with Red Erwin.

Graff: He was over the trucks?

Adams: And I asked him about it, and he said "No we got another job for you." He said "You're going to stay here." He said then you're going up to the museum and work there. He says, "You signed up for that didn't you?" And I said yes, but I...

Graff: Would rather drive a truck.

Adams: Yes, if you'd like me to. He said "No I got all my truck drivers I need here."

Graff: Yes.

Adams: So I started working there. It took me quite a while to get used to that kind of work.

Graff: Well what did you do exactly?

Adams: Well, in the winter time, a lot of times the Chief Naturalist wasn't there.

Graff: Who was the Chief Naturalist then here?

Adams: I can't remember the one that was before Walker, but I started with him and he was only there for about three or four months. He went all through the summer, but then it came winter and then he was transferred to Washington D.C. but I can't remember his name. And then about three, well it was the next spring, Walker came and he took over as the Naturalist and we worked pretty good. I took care of the museum all through the winter by myself.

Graff: Just describe a day for me. Did you stay down here at the camp?

Adams: Yes, I stayed.

Graff: And so you'd get up and line up and have breakfast and everything down here?

Adams: Yes, I'd have breakfast and then I'd go up there.

Graff: How'd you go up there? Did you have a way that you'd walk up from here up there?

Adams: Yes, most of the time. Once in a while I caught a ride. Sometimes the ranger down here would come along and give me a ride up. And then I'd open up the museum.

Graff: And so what, you'd have to be up there say eight o'clock or something to open the museum?

Adams: Yes.

Graff: Okay.

Adams: Maybe sometimes earlier, sometimes a little later.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: It didn't get opened up until I got there.

Graff: They didn't start things until you got there.

Adams: No, no, you see I was the only person there.

Graff: Yes, in the winter.

Adams: Yes. They had the rangers' headquarters was just in back of that, at that time.

Graff: Now where are we talking about the museum? They've had it in a couple of different places. Was it right here in the fork of the roads?

Adams: No, it was right there by that stone bridge.

Graff: Yes, right where the road forks there, just down back from that.

Adams: On this side of the bridge.

Graff: Yes, because they also had a museum at one time clear up where the old camp ground was, but we're not talking about that one. Okay, I just wanted to make that clear. Okay.

Adams: Yes, it was right there by the bridge.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: Yes. You see I was sitting right at the table there and the guy came in on the motorcycle, and he didn't make that turn and went head first right into the bridge. It killed him instantly.

Graff: Oh gee-wiz.

Adams: He was a guy from one of these little towns down here, from Springdale or from LaVerkin.

Graff: Oh, yes.

Adams: I only had to go about a hundred yards, and he was dead. I took the pulse on his neck.

Graff: And he was gone?

Adams: Yes, his neck was kinked up.

Graff: He broke his neck then.

Adams: I ran back and called the head ranger.

Graff: You had a telephone there, did you?

Adams: Yes

Graff: Yes.

Adams: Yes sir. That was the old crank type?

Graff: Sure.

Adams: Our ring was three long.

Graff: Three long, yes.

Adams: And they had a long and a short, so I clearly clicked the long one and just the short, and the chief ranger Johnny answered the phone, and I told him. I said "There's been an accident down here by the bridge. Could you come down?" I said, "I think the man is dead." So he came down, and he said "Yes he's dead." So I don't know what they did, I turned it over to them.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: Because, you know you don't want to get mixed up.

Graff: So after you opened the museum up in the morning what was your duty? Did you meet people?

Adams: Yes. See they had quite a few exhibits in the museum. One especially I liked was . . . well they had a topographical map showing all the mountains of interest and names of them.

Graff: Was that the relief map that actually was, yeah I think it's still up there, the same one, still up in the visitor's center. In fact it was the three C's that built that come to think of it, and they were working down in California. They put it together down there.

Adams: Yes, I think it was built in Berkeley.

Graff: Yes, that's right; I've seen pictures of them working on it.

Adams: Yes, and then the other one was that Indian [exhibit].

Graff: Yes, the Indian, right.

Adams: I knew the guy that went down there to get that, John Williams.

Graff: Oh yes.

Adams: And he was a nice fella, I was looking for him here, but I don't know, he might be dead too now.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: That was quite a few years back.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: He drove truck.

Graff: Are you sure that he went down there to get that....

Adams: He drove a truck from here.

Graff: Down to get the map?

Adams: No, no the map was here.

Graff: He went down to get the Indian scene.

Adams: Yes

Graff: Oh, I see

Adams: And that was made out of wax.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: And we thought that the rock museum would be able to shed the heat enough, but they found out that they had to put refrigeration in it to hold

Graff: Yes, to keep the wax from melting.

Adams: Yes, it was made out of wax. They didn't think about all the heat that was here. They should have told them at the time, the heat got up to 120 here in the day time.

Graff: So when people would come in, you'd show them around the museum and explain things to them?

Adams: Yes, and talk a little.

Graff: Did you stay right in the building then most the time?

Adams: Well, I didn't all the time. Actually the chief naturalist came in and sometimes I'd go up in the tunnel and go to that big window and when people would come in there, then I'd point out different things.

Graff: Is that right?

Adams: Yes, and a lot of the time, sometimes they sent me up to the East gate too, because they didn't have a ranger there all the time to check what was coming in and what was.

Graff: So you just were a ranger, a naturalist, and everything?

Adams: Oh yeah.

Graff: Did you just wear CCC clothes?

Adams: Yes, I've got some here. I had to put boots on and wore them jodhpur pants and the bat wings.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: I wore them and then I wore a gray shirt most of the time.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: Not much of the time did I wear the CC clothes because the darn things were so hot.

Graff: Hot, sure.

Adams: Yeah, and so I kind of sent them to get cooler clothes because I worked there in the summer time and then in the winter time they put me at a different job. Sometimes I would drive Dr. Gregory. I don't know whether you know him?

Graff: Yeah, I don't know him.

Adams: The "One-dollar-a-year" man. I took him over to Capitol Reef and different places. In fact, I spent about three months with him. He was making a book, *The Geology of the Grand Cannon Region*. I don't know whether it was ever filed, or if it ever has been.

Graff: What was his name again?

Adams: Dr. Gregory.

Graff: Oh golly, he's got all kinds of publications. Yes, I didn't realize who you were talking about. I was thinking of a medical doctor when you said that.

Adams: No

Graff: No. Oh yeah, I don't know how many books he published. And you used to drive him around?

Adams: Yes.

Graff: Boy, that's quite a distinction.

Adams: That was in the winter time. He had a little old '33 Chevrolet coupe. For a long time it stayed right up there in that barn.

Graff: Yes, they even named up on the Kolob section here, they named one of the mountains after him "Gregory Butte."

Adams: I didn't know that. This is my first trip back in, I guess in fifty years.

Graff: Is that right?

Adams: At least.

Graff: So you hadn't been back since your CCC days then?

Adams: No, well, it's been pretty close to sixty years since I was discharged.

Graff: Oh yeah, I guess that's true. This is '89.

Adams: See, no it's been fifty years since I have been here. I come in and see my sister in Cedar City, and we had to come down here. I was in the first Easter thing.

Graff: Easter Pageant?

Adams: Yeah.

Graff: The one that was up the canyon? Not the one over here?

Adams: No, the one that was up the canyon. I was in that pageant.

Graff: What did you do for that?

Adams: Well, I was one in the bunch that rushed down off the hill, you know to string the thieves. . .

Graff: String Christ up on the cross.

Adams: Just one of the bunch. They just picked us all out, and whoever picked us out, what they wanted, they picked the ugliest.

Graff: That's what they required huh?

Adams: Yes, as long as you really looked ugly, so you're the guy we want or one of the guys. They had quite a few of them. I guess just about our whole camp that was here. See there's only a sub camp here in the summer, at most, I guess, about 25 to 30, and they were cleaning up through the campgrounds. I worked up there all the time in the museum.

Graff: Now you mentioned the snake pit earlier when I was talking to you? Tell me about that and what you had to do with the snakes.

Adams: The snake pit, well first we had cages and rattlesnakes, well not rattlesnakes so much, but the stripped racers.

Graff: Yes, sure.

Adams: They'd get out of these. We even put wire on that, and for some reason they could tear it off. And so they thought about the snake pit. And so, they got the CC boys to build that. I kind of oversee it, and still, it was possibly about four feet deep, and some of the snakes could still climb out.

Graff: Climb out. How did you line walls? Just with rocks?

Adams: It was made out of rock.

Graff: Masonry, like the building here?

Adams: Something similar to that. It was a little smoother than that and not as thick. It was smaller rocks, and then on the inside, it was plastic. See but the outside, it showed the rocks.

Graff: Now wait a minute. Was it above ground? Was it built above? Oh I see it wasn't down in the ground then?

Adams: No, They dug out first, some, because they wanted it.

Graff: But this was kind of like a well casing then coming up out of the ground so it actually came up what, maybe three or four feet above the ground?

Adams: Did you see the museum the first one?

Graff: No.

Adams: Oh, you see they had a window there and it was about the height of that right there.

Graff: About five feet up then?

Adams: Yes, and it came across right and underneath that there was the top. They had cages we'd lift up, and they put a heavy net wire fence, or a heavy netting fence on the top of these cages, you know the doors? But that was too big, the snakes...

Graff: Come right through it.

Adams: Come right through it, even with as deep as it was, it was very close to four feet deep. So we had to get screen wire and put on that from underneath. I helped catch snakes and then we had guys, some of the rangers, some of the naturalists that would go out and catch some of the snakes, and then the guys that were policing the roads through here like that would watch out for snakes and then bring them in there. And they also got those gila monsters. And I hated to see, I'd catch mice for the snakes you know, but I hated to see those poor gila monsters in there with nothing to eat. So I got thinking, would they eat eggs? So I swiped an egg from the cook and brought it up there, broke it, right in front of them, you know? They're slow at moving, as you know, because you could drop it right in front of them and it'd take them a little while to get over there. You know they're always flicking their tongue, sticking it out. When you hit that, and put it like that, and he went right for it. So I decided that was enough, maybe enough food for them so, I made a concoction of bread, mixed bread in with the....

Graff: With the egg?

Adams: Yes, and that lasted much longer because you can always tell when they're full because they round up, just like a snake. But a snake will only eat about three times during the summer time.

Graff: Is that right?

Adams: Yes, and they eat sometimes but they kept to about three mice, three or four mice.

Graff: When they'd eat, they'd eat three of them at once?

Adams: Yes, and then they'd have to shed their skin. And while they're shedding their skin, their eyes would go blind. And that is the dangerous time for rattlesnakes because he cannot see you. He can hear you and he will strike.

Graff: Strike at anything.

Adams: Yes, at any time.

Graff: Now did you have a lot of everything down in this one pit? The gila monsters, and the snakes of all different kinds, and everything?

Adams: The worst time that we had was when we got that black and white snake. What is that one called?

Graff: Oh yes.

Adams: Sometimes they'd even eat the rattlesnake.

Graff: Oh would they?

Adams: Yes, they're black and white, and I cannot think of what their name is.

Graff: Yeah, I'm not a very good snake identifier.

Adams: Yes, but anyway, they're not poisonous.

Graff: Yes.

Adams: We have two snakes in here that are poisonous. That's the rattlesnake and the diadophis. It looks like a rubber snake. It's kind of green on the back, and on the underside it's yellow or orange. Sometimes it's yellow; sometimes it's orange. But they're awfully pretty. They don't ever get over about a foot long. I've never seen one longer. They have fangs, but their poison is about like a bee sting. Maybe a little worse, but very few people would die from it, no more than what a person would from a bee sting.

Graff: Now did you get these snakes out to show them to people or did you just open the lid and let them?

Adams: Yes, we would pick them right up and show them to people.

Graff: Did you have trouble with that or were you used to picking snakes up?

Adams: Well at first I was [scared], but then after I'd done it for a while I would wake up and not dream about it. Dreaming about them, and stuff like that, but after a while you get used to it, just like picking up a piece of candy or something.

Graff: I suppose.

Adams: Yes.

Graff: Nobody ever got bit or anything while you were showing them, or you yourself never got bit by a snake?

Adams: On the rattlesnakes, you kept good hold right behind their head so they couldn't.

Graff: How'd you get down into the pit to get ahold of them?

Adams: We usually had a forked stick, something like that, and you'd just watch. I never picked up a rattlesnake when it was blind. I always waited till...

Graff: It got the skin off.

Adams: Yes, and I'd have to fish that out too, because I generally took care of all the reptiles there.

Graff: You had a pretty interesting job compared to others, a very different job than everybody else in the three C's then.

Adams: The naturalist would come down after taking their trip. They went up at ten o'clock in the day time, went up to the Narrows, and then took them for the hike up through the canyon, generally in the summer time about two hours. Sometimes they'd have me go along with them if there was a lot there so I could count and bring up the rear.

Graff: Yes, keep everybody together.

Adams: And then the other times, why if there wasn't a very big group there, they'd tell me to go back down.

Graff: Did you ever stand in for them? Did you ever guide one of the hikes or did you just go along with the ranger?

Adams: No, I never did.

Graff: But you'd be down at the museum. You did all the interpretation there, telling people about the museum and the snakes then.

Adams: Yes, and then sometimes I was even relieving the fellow down here on the gate.

Graff: Oh, so you collected fees and all that?

Adams: No I never collected any fees. I told them "Nope, I didn't want to do that." I said if I'm sworn in as ranger I'll collect fees, but I said legally I cannot do that.

Graff: So then what would you do, just talk to people as they came in?

Adams: I'd talk to people and tell them. . .

Graff: . . . how and where to go?

Adams: Yes, and they'd want to pay me. I'd tell them no, that I couldn't collect from them. I said "This is a free day."

Graff: I'll bet that made them happy.

Adams: Yes, it certainly did. They didn't allow me to give them that year's sticker, so if we had any from the previous year, then they'd always want a sticker, but I said no, that I couldn't do it because...

Graff: Because you weren't a ranger.

Adams: Yes, and I said, "But I can give you one from the previous year." Yes, and they were happy to get that.

Graff: Well that's pretty neat. So how many years were you here then?

Adams: About five years.

Graff: You stayed right with it all the time in the three C's?

Adams: Yes

Graff: So you never did work for the park service, you just worked for the CCC?

Adams: No, I never did, I never did work actually for the park service.

Graff: So you were here until '39?

Adams: I was a junior technician the last part.

Graff: Did that give you a pay increase?

Adams: Yes, seventy dollars a month.

Graff: Is that right?

Adams: Yes, that wasn't too bad back then.

Graff: That was pretty good money.

Adams: Yes.

Graff: Because you were doing a skilled job like that then? I'll be darned. Well you were in until '39? Is that correct?

Adams: Yes.

Graff: What inspired you then to get out and leave?

Adams: Well that was when the funds run out. See they were only allotted so much funds for that and they said that I couldn't stay and work.

Graff: Yes, no funds for it, so what'd you do then?

Adams: Well from then, I went back home for a little while.

Graff: Back home to Paragonah?

Adams: Yes. Well sometimes I stayed with my sister in Cedar City. I wasn't there very long. I started farming and then I went over to Nevada and started farming, settled there, you know, working? So I was a head man on a mower, on a mowing machine with horses.

Graff: With a team of horses, yes.

Adams: I was the first, I don't know what you want all that stuff on tape.

Graff: Oh sure, go ahead. You can go ahead and tell me about it. I want it even if the Park doesn't.

Adams: And then, the ranch I was working for there was a swallow ranch.

Graff: And this was where?

Adams: It was Shoshone, Nevada.

Graff: Yeah, I'm not familiar with it.

Adams: Well all that is there is a mine, and I think it's that it's the stuff they use for hardening steel. I think that's titanium, isn't it?

Graff: Titanium, yes I think.

Adams: But anyway, that's out from Ely about seventy five miles, this side. I was breaking horses on the range. Every half day I'd change....

Graff: Put a colt with one of the broke horses.

Adams: Yes, that was passed down. We had seven mowers.

Graff: And you were the leadoff man?

Adams: I was the leadoff man.

Graff: Cutting grass hay, I suppose.

Adams: Yes, well this one particular day my pitman broke, and it was about at least a mile down around.

Graff: Make the circle.

Adams: Yes, each way, and so I just, when I got to the end there, I just picked up my sickle bar and started in. I was the only one that had a time restriction. I never thought about it until I started down the road, you know, to come in. The guy come out there and said, "John I want you to stay in the field until its noon." And I said, "Well my sickle broke." He said, "Oh." I says, "I don't like you're attitude anyway. I wouldn't be coming in here if something wasn't wrong."

Graff: If you didn't have a break down.

Adams: I looked back and saw all the guys coming in. That made him still madder. He said, "Well why didn't you stop and tell them?" I said, "I never thought about it. I figured they had the [unintelligible]... So one of the guys that was there with me, he says, "Let's go to California." When I was having that argument with that guy, I just told him plain out, "I don't like his attitude." He says "Let's go to California."

It was just starting to get where the ship yards would open up and stuff like that. He said we could go down there and get a job, and I said that's fine with me, let's do it. Well I started carpentry first down there and building the places.

Graff: Where at in California?

Adams: Oh where at? Well I started in Oakland, the shipyard center.

End of interview.