

Weldon Keele
Zion National Park Oral History Project
CCC Reunion
September 28, 1989

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Wayne Hinton: This is Wayne Hinton, interviewing Weldon Keele, on September 28, 1989, in connection with the CCC Reunion at Zion National Park. Weldon, you came into the CCC's in 1936?

Weldon Keele: Actually, 1935. I came down to Zion's Canyon in October of 1936.

Wayne Hinton: Where did you enter the CCCs?

Weldon Keele: I entered the CC camp at Provo and I went up to Hobble Creek for that one summer. Then they moved me to Mayfield. Then in August of 1936, they moved us to Bryce Canyon. We was there until about the end of October, I think, and the snow ran us off so they sent us to Zion.

Wayne Hinton: When you entered the CCC, were you with Bridge Mountain Camp from the very beginning or were you reassigned to that camp?

Weldon Keele: I was reassigned there. That was the camp I came to when I came down here.

Wayne Hinton: But those guys you were working with at Bryce probably were a spike camp out of the Bridge Mountain Camp.

Weldon Keele: Probably, yes.

Wayne Hinton: What kinds of work did you do then once you were assigned?

Weldon Keele: I was helping the rock masons mostly at time. We built some of those retaining walls along the switchbacks. One day I went down here and helped him replace some rock on that there big monument coming in to the South end of the park. I can't remember what his name was but he was the best rock mason I've ever seen. He could cut a rock as square as a brick.

Wayne Hinton: Was he a local guy?

Weldon Keele: I think he lived in Springdale.

Wayne Hinton: One of the Lamb's then.

Weldon Keele: But he was a marvel at that.

Wayne Hinton: What was your home town?

Keele: My hometown was Emery, Utah. I graduated from South Emery High School in 1935.

Hinton: So you were about 18 when you went into the CCCs?

Keele: I was 18. I spent a few, three or four months, bumming around on railroads, trying to find a job. Finally I got back home and they signed me up for the CC camp.

Hinton: How did you go about getting enrolled?

Keele: It seems like they came there and enrolled me. My father only had one hand, so he couldn't get a job anywhere. So I didn't have any trouble getting in. I was the oldest one of the family of eight.

Hinton: So the twenty-five dollars they sent home was pretty much appreciated.

Keele: Yes, really appreciated. Yet my mother saved some of it for me.

Hinton: Oh, did she?

Keele: I went to school on it.

Hinton: So when you got out, you went to BAC in Cedar City.

Keele: Yes, she saved a little of it. I had a scholarship that I'd earned taking orders blanks from Montgomery Ward and getting people to order on them. So I had about \$700 built up and she saved me a little. I had enough to go through school that first quarter.

Hinton: You left the CCC program in order to go to school?

Keele: That's right.

Hinton: So you left just prior to the Winter Quarter of 1937?

Keele: Yes. I left here on the 2nd of January 1937.

Hinton: Went right to Cedar City and enrolled in school?

Keele: Yes.

Hinton: Did you avail yourself of some of the opportunities here in the camp?

Keele: Yes. This Robertson guy who was the educational advisor got me interested in going to school. I had always wanted to be a forest ranger or a park ranger or something like that. After I got out of the Air Corps in 1936, I had a family so I just had to go to work.

Hinton: 1946?

Keele: Yes. 1946, that's right. But he kind of encouraged me to go over there. Actually, when I signed up for the CC camp, I signed up as a typist. But after I sat in a desk for a while typing, I decided I was a rock and shovel man. So, that's what I did most of the time when I was in the CC camp.

Hinton: How long were you actually in this East Camp here at Zion?

Keele: I was only here two or three months: October, November, and December of 1936. But, I really enjoyed it down here. We used to have a Model-A Ford that we parked outside the park. We'd get the park rangers to haul us up there and then we'd go chase some girls over in Orderville and around there in Kanab. Then we'd come back and park our car down there in Springdale the next week and then the next week we'd go back some different way around.

Hinton: You'd go to Hurricane and maybe St. George?

Keele: Yes.

Hinton: But you couldn't leave on weekdays, could you?

Keele: No. This was just weekends. We had most of our weekend off. We'd leave here on Friday night and we'd sleep in the car. We would go to Hurricane or St. George. We stopped at Short Creek one time; we were going to get some of those girls, but we couldn't find a girl in town.

Hinton: There probably weren't too many single ones.

Keele: No. In fact I don't think we saw a girl there. We stopped and asked around but there were never any girls.

Hinton: So, from October 'til January 2nd you were working as a stone mason?

Keele: Most of the time, yes, as an assistant stone mason.

Hinton: Any other projects you worked on?

Keele: I dug rocks out of the hillside that was going to slide onto the road.

Hinton: Up here on the switchbacks?

Keele: Yes. I don't remember of ever going on any of the trails. It seemed like I was working down on the switchbacks and on this here monument. That's most of what I did.

Hinton: Did you work on any of the buildings, such as the storage warehouse?

Keele: No. I don't recall ever working on any of the buildings. That monument's about the only thing other than those retaining walls that I remember working on.

Hinton: The retaining walls are the ones that are on the switchbacks?

Keele: Yes. That one high one there, we had to build a scaffold to get some of the rocks on that. It was pretty cold when working there. I remember it snowed.

Hinton: What kind of winter gear would they issue you?

Keele: We had the regular army OD's and the clothing was plenty warm it seemed like, except the underwear was wool and it seemed like it would about itch you to death. I don't recall it ever getting real cold. They [would] always build a fire and all. So if it got too cold, we could go warm our hands on it. We always had good gloves and most the working equipment we had was good.

Hinton: Some of these projects that have involved stone masonry they've had to put some pretty large stones in place. You probably had to put some big stones on that monument up the south entrance.

Keele: Yes. It seems like it was up quite high. There was two of us would lift the stone up to this guy that was setting up there. But he was a marvel, that there stone mason. I've never seen a guy. He could take a rock, big rock like that, and he'd take a crack at it and he'd cut that thing this square. He was really good and he was a wonderful guy to work with too.

Hinton: But you don't remember his name?

Keele: No, I don't remember. He was kind of a short guy; it seemed like he had red hair and he was a stone mason if I ever saw one.

Hinton: Did you feel that your CCC experience prepared you in any way for life?

Keele: No, I wouldn't take a lot for that CCC experience. I really had a lot of fun. I had a bad experience when I was in the CC camp at Mayfield. I got a mastoid in my ear. I guess the doctor we had there didn't know what it was, or something. Anyhow, I was in the infirmary there and the inspecting doctor out of Fort Douglas come down there, and he saw me and he says, "You get that kid to the hospital as quick as you can." So they shipped me to the hospital in Salina and they was preparing to operate on me and it busted. So they never did operate on me. But I was out of my head for two or three days. I didn't know what was going on.

Hinton: You must have had a high fever.

Keele: Yes, and I must have had a lot of pressure on my brain, or something. I was out of it for a few days, but I come out of it okay. Never did have an operation.

Hinton: Yes. At least it should have ruptured your eardrum and kept you out of the army.

Keele: Yes. That's one thing, when I went into Air Corps, it was Army Air Corps at the time, they asked me if I'd ever been in the CC camp, and I said "yes." They said, "Did you get an honorable discharge?" and I said "yes." That's all they ever said about it. I never knew that I had a discharge paper until I got out of the Air Force and I was home looking through some of my mother's papers and I found my CCC discharge. She kept that for me.

Hinton: Were there guys that were in the CCCs that got dishonorable discharges?

Keele: Yes.

Hinton: Guys here in this camp?

Keele: Yes. They had some guys that they had to get rid of.

Hinton: Guys that didn't choose to work?

Keele: I don't particularly remember any guys in this camp. Of course I wasn't here too long. But I remember guys that they had to kick out because they was trouble makers in some of the other camps. I don't particularly remember any here. But there was some bad characters there sometimes.

Hinton: When you were here did they have the West Camp going too?

Keele: Yes, and there was a bunch of guys from back east that was in that. They used to have quite some battles sometimes. We'd go and get a bunch of girls and those guys decided they wanted them. And a lot of times, the girls preferred those guys to the local guys here. We used to have a swing across the river. When we'd go down to Springdale, we'd swing across that river, you know, at night.

Hinton: Does that mean you were sneaking out of camp?

Keele: No, this was our regular procedure of going out on weekends. Well, we was free to go a lot of weeknights too. We'd swing across that river and then walk on down. But one night we was swinging across there and the first guy that went across we heard him splash in the water. This was kind of unusual, so then another guy swung across and he fell in the water too. By this time, we'd got a little bit concerned, so we all went right in to the water and here was those guys from the other camp over there knocking them guys down in the water. So we had a little battle that night.

Hinton: Who won it?

Keele: We won it 'cause there was a lot more of us. But we had two or three battles with those guys, mostly over girls.

Hinton: Do you remember what states those guys were from?

Keele: I think they were from Kentucky and West Virginia, some of those places back there. Course there were some local guys that was in that camp too.

Hinton: In the West Camp?

Keele: We had two or three guys that was with me in Mayfield and down here, too. One kid we'd call 'Kansas' all the time. He come from Kansas. There was two or three other guys, one kid come from Pennsylvania, I think.

Hinton: And they were in the same camp?

Keele: And they were in the same camp as we were.

Hinton: They were in the East Camp.

Keele: I guess they was mixed up quite a bit. I was talking to some of the guys here today and said that they was in camp with some of those folks from back east.

Hinton: On the projects, when you went out to work on a project, they probably were sent to different projects from other camps.

Keele: I don't recall of us ever being on the same project, work project. We was usually on one project and they was somewhere else. Most of the trouble we had with them was when we'd be downtown with them, or going to town, or something.

Hinton: Did you ever have dances here in Zion?

Keele: Yes. Of course we used to go to Orderville and Kanab and Hurricane and St. George and all over to the various dances. Yes, we done a lot of traveling around. My best friend had a small late Ford and so, like I said, we'd go from one end of the park to the other and leave it parked on one end. Then next week we'd pick it up and go the other way. Just about every weekend we'd do that. So we had a lot of fun.

Hinton: Did you participate in any kinds of recreational activities while you were in here in the CC's? Some of the guys talked about having a baseball team.

Keele: I never did participate in that. It seemed like our big thing when we had any free time was chasing girls.

Hinton: Somebody talked about a rec room too, where you played ping-pong and cards.

Keele: Yes, we used to do that, played cards.

Hinton: That prepared you for the army, didn't it?

Keele: But I really enjoyed it. I remember one time there was a bunch of us guys down in Springdale. We was messing around out there and one of the guys pushed another guy and he hit a big plate glass on the front of the store and broke it out. I think we had to replace that glass.

Hinton: Was that Hardy's Store?

Keele: Yes.

Hinton: They weren't too happy about it?

Keele: No, they was pretty unhappy. I think all the guys got together and...

Hinton: Everybody in the camp?

Keele: The guys that was in the crowd. We'd usually go in bunches of maybe ten or twelve guys when we'd go to Springdale. Course when we'd go to other places where we had to go in the car, there'd be two or three of us or four maybe. We kept pretty busy here all of the time.

Hinton: On weekends, some of these kids from the local towns, like kids from Orderville or Springdale or Rockville or Hurricane, would go home on the weekends. What happened in camp? The rest of you would stay and they'd stay to cook for you?

Keele: Yes. If there was any of us here, they'd stay and cook for us. We didn't miss any meals. The food was always good, I thought. I always quite enjoyed it.

Hinton: Were the cooks army cooks?

Keele: No, they were CC guys. Most of the cooks were guys that were, they called them, leaders. They got \$45 a month. Then they had what they called assistant leaders who was usually cooks or had some special job, and they got \$36 a month.

Hinton: And the enrollee's got \$30?

Keele: Yes. Some of the truck drivers got \$36 a month.

Hinton: It seems like that would be a cushy job.

Keele: Yes, but I was always afraid to drive, still afraid to drive. So I never did attempt to drive. My best friend was a truck driver.

Hinton: One of the guys this morning indicated that some of those outfits weren't in the best mechanical condition.

Keele: Oh no, not always.

Hinton: He said the one he drove he had to block his knee over the gear shift to keep it in gear.

Keele: Yes. I don't recall that. Course I was never in the cab with them. We always rode in the back. I remember lots of time we'd get sick from the exhaust fumes coming up in the back. They had a tarp over the back and if it was real cold they'd put a curtain down in the back. But that gas would sneak in there. They used to take us around to various places in those trucks, to dances and stuff, or if we had a special invitation to some big celebration or something. I remember up there in Sanpete County, they used to take us up to some of those towns' homecoming, and we'd go up there and box to entertain people. I used to go and box with some of the guys. I was usually always got whipped, but they'd pay us for it, four or five dollars. It was worth it.

Hinton: Did they have boxing here in the camp?

Keele: Yes, they had boxing. I don't recall of ever going out on any boxing tours like we did up there, down here. Like I say, I was only here two or three months. We was usually chasing girls most all the free time we had. That was our big recreation it seems like.

Hinton: These guys in the West Camp obviously wouldn't have any automobiles.

Keele: No, I don't think they did.

Hinton: Did they kind of resent you guys having cars?

Keele: They may have done. That may have been one of the things that...and it just seems like a lot of these girls preferred them to us. We didn't like that. The girls called us farmers, you know. Those guys back there were a little more sophisticated I guess, I don't know. I had three sisters that married CC camps, or guys from back east. So they had something that the local guys didn't have, I guess.

Hinton: What was tourism in Zion like in those days? Were there many tourists coming through?

Keele: I don't remember too many of the tourists. We was working most the time.

Woman's Voice: You about ready?

Hinton: He's about through, yes.

Woman voice: We've got two hours, so if we're going to go over to his room...

Hinton: I'll let him go in just a minute.

Woman's voice: We have to come back about 5:30. We'd have to come back, so in about an hour and a half.

Hinton: Yes. Six o'clock is when they'll start. Well, it sounds as if you need to go. I appreciate your spending this time with me.

Keele: If she gets too warm, boy, she wants to go. I'm kind of lucky though my brother's got a mobile home down here in Springdale. So we're staying in that and it's air conditioned.

Hinton: Yes, about this time in the afternoon the air conditioning feels pretty good. Are you retired now?

Keele: Yes. I worked for 27 years in the coal mines for US Steel. Then all the time I worked in the coal mines, I sold insurance part time for State Farm Mutual, and I sold insurance for them for 35 years, I just quite when I turned 70.

Hinton: So you must have lived over in Emery County then if you were in the coal mines.

Keele: I lived in Carbon and Emery County. I lived in Salt Lake, oh, maybe a year and a half after I got out of the Air Corps. I was a book keeper up there and I wasn't a book keeper. So I went down, my brother and uncles and all those guys were making a lot more money mining coal, so that's what I ended up doing.

Hinton: Well, Weldon, I appreciate you spending this time this afternoon and sharing your experiences in the CCC's. Most everyone I have talked to has said they really regarded the CCC program with some fond memories and they felt it was a really positive thing in their lives and positive for the nation.

Keele: It was a good thing for me, I know that. Like I say, I was riding the rail around looking for work when they...

Hinton: You were just riding the freight cars then, on the bum?

Keele: Yes. On the bum, actually, and I wasn't finding much work. I wasn't eating too well either. No, and I had a couple of old guys that were doing a lot of that who'd been on the railroad bumming for a lot of years. Them old guys would feed me or I guess I'd of got downer than I did. They were real good to me.

Hinton: Well, thanks again.

Keele: But I really enjoyed all the time I spent in the CC camp. I've always felt like it was a good thing for me.

[End of interview.]