

Ferrell Olsen
Zion National Park Oral History
CCC Reunion
27 September 1989

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Bart Anderson: This is Bart Anderson with an oral history for the CCC September 29, 1989 Zion National Park, and we're interviewing Ferrell Olsen, 1936-1937. First of all, let me get some background information on you, Ferrell. What did you do before you came to the CCC?

Ferrell Olsen: I was working on the farm.

Bart Anderson: Working on the farm up in . . .

Ferrell Olsen: Richfield.

Bart Anderson: You're from Richfield, and that's where you were working. What made you decide to come to the CC's?

Ferrell Olsen: To get some money, I guess. No work, no money.

Bart Anderson: Was it a bad year for the farms that year, do you remember?

Ferrell Olsen: Yes. We was in a drought.

Bart Anderson: You came here in 1936, and you stayed one year?

Ferrell Olsen: No. I stayed five, about six months.

Bart Anderson: Which camp or which division were you with?

Ferrell Olsen: I was in NP-4.

Bart Anderson: NP-4, and that's Bryce?

Ferrell Olsen: Bridge Mountain. Across the river.

Bart Anderson: Well, I'll let you just tell me about what you want to tell. You've got some pictures there. I think that looks kind of interesting.

Ferrell Olsen: Yes. That's our commanding officer.

Bart Anderson: Boy. Major Chauncey B. Whitney.

Ferrell Olsen: Yes, he got killed in the war.

Bart Anderson: When Major Chauncey Whitney was your director, what did he do? What were your duties here that he led you in?

Olsen: Well, they was on control of all the camp, all the personnel in the camp, and they was over us when we was off work.

Anderson: Oh, so was he your evening entertainment? He was over the—

Olsen: Well, he run the whole camp.

Anderson: What was your particular assignment during this six month period?

Olsen: When I was here, I was up front sloping banks.

Anderson: So making kind of a gradual bank so the runoff wouldn't come down here?

Olsen: Yes. That was on the switchbacks.

Anderson: That's where you worked up on the switchback area.

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: Okay, let's look at some of the other pictures here.

Olsen: There's one that I took of Bridge Mountain.

Anderson: We're looking at a picture, 1937, from the Camp of Zion looking up towards Bridge Mountain Arch.

Olsen: That was with a little camera through a field glass.

Anderson: Well, that's a unique picture in itself. Did you ever get up to that area?

Olsen: Oh, no. It's clear up the top of the mountain. There's one of the deer in the camp.

Anderson: Deer in the camp, again, with a very small photograph of Zion in 1937. Were there a lot of deer back there in 1937?

Olsen: There was quite a few. That was in the daytime.

Anderson: You know, it sounds funny to ask this question, but did you do any hunting? Did any of the CC people supplement the meat supply or anything?

Olsen: No. They wouldn't. We weren't allowed to.

Anderson: Weren't allowed to do any hunting. Did people bring guns, firearms?

Olsen: No.

Anderson: Now, there's another little picture were looking at. This looks like the mess hall.

Olsen: That's the mess hall.

Anderson: Oh, boy, that's precious! This is a picture of the mess hall of the CC camp.

Olsen: There's another picture of the camp.

Anderson: Another picture of the camp dated 1937. From your recollection, it looks like, first of all, that there's dirt roads that come up into here.

Olsen: Yes, they was always dirt.

Anderson: Everything was dirt. From about how far below the park? Do you remember?

Olsen: I can't remember.

Anderson: But was it difficult? Did you come up in wagons or cars or—?

Olsen: Oh no, we come up in cars.

Anderson: It was good enough that you could drive?

Olsen: Yeah, I think the highway was oiled.

Anderson: But the main road down here was dirt. Some of these buildings—of course this is a very small photograph—can you remember much about any of the buildings?

Olsen: The sleeping quarters and the mess hall. That's all I can remember. This is between the barracks.

Anderson: Okay, it looks like snow.

Olsen: That was snow.

Anderson: How did you stay warm in those barracks at night?

Olsen: We had a big potbelly stove—two of them—in two ends. One in each end.

Anderson: One in each end of the barracks. Did somebody each night have duty to fill up the fire with wood or something?

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: Where did they get the wood?

Olsen: (Laughter)

Anderson: That wasn't in your duty, but somebody—somehow—it was just there. Boy, it looks like cold, I'll bet. Can you remember, did they have enough blankets and such? Were you—?

Olsen: Oh yes, they give us an extra one.

Anderson: It says there fifteen inches of snow in 1937.

Olsen: There's a . . .

Anderson: Yes, what about the icicle?

Olsen: There's an icicle over through there.

Anderson: On one of the ledges?

Olsen: On one of the ledges. I'll bet it must have been thirty feet around and I don't know how long. It must have been a block long, so when it fell, we could hear it over here.

Anderson: It broke. Where did the water come from?

New voice: From off the tops of the cliffs, and when the icicle formed, a block long, thirty feet—wow!—that must have been a . . .

Olsen: I just guessed at it.

Anderson: Pretty big, anyway.

Olsen: There's another picture that I took out of the window up in the tunnel.

Anderson: This is another small photograph looking out of the window in the tunnel. Now, before you retired, you were an electrician up in Richfield.

Olsen: I was in Salt Lake.

Anderson: Did you do any electrical work with the CC people?

Olsen: No.

Anderson: You didn't get any of the training that you used later life from—.

Olsen: No. We had a class in telephones.

Anderson: How to run a telephone or how to string up lines?

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: When they had maintenance—because this is something you know about electrical work; they had lights in each one of the barracks and such—did they have once person in the CC program, I mean in each barracks that was in charge of the electrical work?

Olsen: No. Not that I know of, unless it was probably on maintenance. Somebody, I don't know who. That's one that was at Bryce Canyon.

Anderson: Now you were in a spike camp at Bryce, too?

Olsen: That's where we moved from to here.

Anderson: Moved from to here. How long were you here in Zion?

Olsen: About five months. A month up there. We went from Mayfield to Bryce Canyon, and then we stayed up there about a month and a half and come down here.

Anderson: This is a picture of the tent. Again, when you were sleeping, you had, was it army cots? Do you remember?

Olsen: It was here.

Anderson: Cots here, but down here, it was kind of bunk beds, military.

Olsen: No. They were cots, too. When I started, we was sleeping on straw ticks. I ended up here with flush toilets.

Anderson: Oh, wow! That's a good question. Did each barracks have a restroom or an outhouse?

Olsen: No. You had to go outside into another building.

Anderson: And then they had one building that was just set aside for—. How about at Bryce? Did they have the same thing for a restroom?

Olsen: Well, they just had outside toilets over there.

Anderson: Now when you get up every morning—and we're talking here about Zion, thinking back—what time did you get up?

Olsen: Oh, probably seven o'clock.

Anderson: Then you had breakfast right shortly after?

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: Then after breakfast, did they assign you the same work roster duty every day, or did you rotate with other groups so that some people were on the lower part of the hill and some people were on the higher part of the hill when you were working the gradient?

Olsen: Well, we started at the top of the hill and shoveled dirt to the bottom.

Anderson: So it's all shoveling dirt from up to down is what you were actually doing.

Olsen: 'Til we got the . . .

Anderson: . . . gradient so it wouldn't slough off. When you worked, about what time did you get your lunch break?

Olsen: Twelve.

Anderson: Kind of interesting for me. Was there a lot of people that didn't work?

Olsen: You mean goldbricks?

Anderson: Yes, goldbricks. I'm not sure how the system was. Was it kind of like a military type of arrangement where you had someone that kind of oversaw you and said, "Hey, you're a goldbrick," or, "You're not a goldbrick today"?

Olsen: well, they didn't have any authority to do that.

Anderson: Oh.

Olsen: Not the guys out on the job.

Anderson: The foremen even were . . .

Olsen: No, it was kind of hard to fire anybody.

Anderson: So what would you say when you think back on [it]? Would you say that most of the people put in a good days work?

Olsen: I think the biggest part of them did.

Anderson: It wouldn't be that way today.

Olsen: No.

Anderson: (laughing) Everybody goldbricking and a few people shoveling. But it was the opposite.

Olsen: Everybody was generally putting their certain amount of shoveling in.

Anderson: I know in other CC programs, quite often they'd have almost rivalry between different groups. You know—"I can move so much dirt before your group." Did you get any of that rivalry here as far as work output? I know you would have it in baseball and other activities, but work output, did they have any of that rivalry at all?

Olsen: No. Only just talk between us.

Anderson: They didn't give you a prize for getting the best grade in?

Olsen: No. We just worked by the hour.

Anderson: Getting back to breakfast. Do you remember about what that would consist of? Pancakes or—?

Olsen: Well, we had hotcakes and French toast, eggs—*powdered* eggs.

Anderson: Powdered eggs? Of course that was probably better than anything—well, you came from a farm—but some of the other people who were really hungry, that was—.

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: How about for lunch? Did you come back into the camp, or did you talk box lunches out?

Olsen: Well, both ways; it all depended on what job you was on.

Anderson: Sometimes you'd take a box lunch, and sometimes you'd come to camp, just depending what your day was? And then, what time? You worked from what, twelve to one was your lunch hour, and then you worked from . . .

Olsen: One 'til four. We had to be in by four.

Anderson: You came in at four; then what would your routine be?

Olsen: We'd have to change clothes and get ready for supper.

Anderson: Then supper would be, what? Five to six?

Olsen: I can't remember. I think it was six o'clock. I can't remember for sure.

Anderson: Then—it's a funny question remembering back to my military days—were you on KP?

Olsen: Oh, yes.

Anderson: How was that assigned?

Olsen: They just went down the roster.

Anderson: (laughs) So it wasn't—?

Olsen: No, there was no demerits or anything.

Anderson: Just went down and each person had a certain amount of time? How about the cooking duty? Was that also on the roster? Or did they have some people that just did that?

Olsen: They just had regular cooks. Down here in this camp, they had KPs that was on steady KP. That's what they wanted to do, and that's where they put them.

Anderson: Okay. Let's go on some photographs here. You've got some more things here.

Olsen: Now there's one that was took New Year's Day. That's on Checkerboard Mountain, and New Year's Eve we went up and shoveled snow to get, I don't know, three or four cars out from the other side.

Anderson: They were coming across . . .

Olsen: Yes, and got stuck on the other side, and then New Year's Day we went up and finished it so that it was a little clearer.

Anderson: You know, you mentioned that earlier that you kept your uniforms. You must have had two or three uniforms or something, 'cause something must have been keeping you warm here—it looks like you're good and bundled up. Did they give you special coats and gloves?

Olsen: Well, we had our big overcoat and then our . . . well, usually we wore two pairs of pants when it got that cold [and] a pair of overalls on top of our regular uniform we had.

Anderson: And how about a cap? Did they provide that?

Olsen: Well, these were earflap.

Anderson: Earflap caps.

Olsen: A hood with the flaps on it.

Anderson: Boy, you had quite an experience. Well, that's more [pictures] than I've ever seen in my life!

Olsen: Now, this was took up where you just seen the deer. And these two guys here are dead.

Anderson: Now, I'm looking at a photograph with three men in them right next to a large Engelmann Prickly Pear, dated 1937. Who [is] the man on the left side?

Olsen: That's Legrand Puzey

Anderson: And where did he come from?

Olsen: Spring City, [Utah].

Anderson: He's dead?

Olsen: He's dead.

Anderson: Okay.

Olsen: That's George Olsen.

Anderson: George Olsen in the center.

Olsen: He was from Sterling, [Utah]. He's dead.

Anderson: Okay.

Olsen: And this was Denzel Pollock from Tropic, and he was supposed to be here today, but I didn't run across him.

Anderson: Oh, it looks like you're kind of making merry, kind of having a good time. Was the associations that you formed here, did they last a lifetime? I mean, did you see the guys from time to time? Because you remember their names.

Olsen: Yes, some of them.

Anderson: I mean, these guys look like they're kind of cards in themselves.

Olsen: Yes, they are. I was going to show you another one. Haven't got it.

Anderson: When you were through, and the evening hours would come, [and] you'd finished up your evening, generally what would the normal routine of the evening be? Would you go into the town?

Olsen: Sometimes we'd go to town and watch a show.

Anderson: Would you have to come all the way to St. George, I guess.

Olsen: Oh, no, they had a show house down here.

Anderson: In . . .

Olsen: Springdale. We generally walked.

Anderson: That's a new one on me—a movie house.

Olsen: I don't know. It was in a building down there. Whether it was in the church or whether they had a separate building I can't remember.

Anderson: Let's pile all of these . . .

Olsen: That's the one I was hunting for. There's another one that was took somewhere here.

Anderson: In the picture: three men by a sliding sand and rock backdrop.

Olsen: That's up on the slope there.

Anderson: Can you remember the fellows?

Olsen: That was Jess Birdman—he's from Salt Lake—this was Roy Shakespear from Tropic, and this was me.

Anderson: Go! You're the handsome guy, huh?

Olsen: No, not too well.

Anderson: Is there any kinds of cute stories about any of these people that you're thinking of? When you look at their faces, can you think of any cute stories they've done? Nobody burned down something, or—? (Laughs)

Olsen: No. No, I can't. Well, we'll keep on with the pictures.

Anderson: Okay.

Olsen: That guy's from Manti.

Anderson: We're looking at another group of people with a tent behind, and there are five individuals in this, and starting on the left of the picture, that's . . .

Olsen: That's in Bryce Canyon.

Anderson: Bryce Canyon.

Olsen: That's Henry Christiansen from Manti.

Anderson: Okay. No story about him?

Olsen: No. Smiling Jack.

Anderson: Smiling Jack. Okay.

Olsen: There's Arthur Jones from Price. He's dead. Kenneth Nelsen, he was from Kenilworth. I thought he died, but he's still alive. This is me. And this one here is a Seely kid from Mount Pleasant. I can't remember his first name.

Anderson: Now how old were you when you came in? You look like a youngster here.

Olsen: When I got down here, I was twenty.

Anderson: Twenty.

Olsen: That's still not the one I thought it was.

Anderson: There may be some more under here.

Olsen: No. That's just the switchbacks. That's all of them but that one. Is that the one of the snowslide?

Anderson: Yes. Is this the snow slide that stopped those cars?

Olsen: Yes, that one.

Anderson: Wow! Look through the pile here . . .

Olsen: Oh. I had one of the guy . . . I don't know where it went. I thought I had it. It was the guy I was talking to when you come in.

Anderson: Oh!

Olsen: And I haven't got it, I guess, either that, or I lost it. I can't see it.

Anderson: Well, it's probably in here.

Olsen: I think that's all the pictures.

Anderson: When you'd go into town and you'd see a movie, did you go into St. George very often, as far as that?

Olsen: As far as I know, I was in Cedar City once and St. George once.

Anderson: So you really didn't go far away from the place?

Olsen: We had to hitchhike. Either that or have a ride.

Anderson: What's some other photographs there?

Olsen: Well this is one I took. I didn't take it, but I cut it out of the paper. This is a kid that was in Pennsylvania, I think it was. And that's the way he looked before he got in the Cs and this is the way he looked after he got something to eat.

Anderson: Would that be a good general, all-around phrase? When you came in, I mean when you went out you were in a lot better health and a lot better physical shape than you were before you came in?

Olsen: Well, the people around here was pretty well fed. People from big cities . . .

Anderson: It was probably worse. But most of the people who were in this didn't come in with bones showing and—?

Olsen: No. Not in our camp, 'cause the biggest part of them was from Utah.

Anderson: Say, how about religious activities on Sundays? What was generally the . . .

Olsen: Well, there was a church down here in town.

Anderson: Okay.

Olsen: We could go to church.

Anderson: That was for the LDS.

Olsen: LDS.

Anderson: A lot of these that you knew of were from Utah, which would make them LDS, but let's say somebody else. Did they have Catholic services or mass up here, do you know?

Olsen: I don't know.

Anderson: Don't remember that?

Olsen: No.

Anderson: What other memorabilia have you got there?

Olsen: This is my weekend passes.

Anderson: Oh! Okay. That's a question. So what they would do is give you a pass when you wanted to go for the weekend, . . .

Olsen: Yes, if they would let you.

Anderson: . . . if they would let you, then you'd go back to . . . it says "going to Monroe" here. That's where you'd go. Would you have to hitchhike? I guess you would.

Olsen: Yes, we didn't have a ride. See, we were not supposed to have vehicles at the time.

Anderson: Did any of the guys have vehicles? You know, I'm sure they did.

Olsen: Yes. I think so.

Anderson: And then you'd go back up. Did these passes, did they have them on a regular basis, you know, rotating, you had one every six months or every two months or every so . . .

Olsen: Well, the way it was, we could only go home once a month or maybe once in two months.

Anderson: Oh. So there was no really rhyme or reason.

Olsen: No.

Anderson: Did you have to do any brown-nosing for it?

Olsen: No. Just went and asked the camp clerk or the captain.

Anderson: Captain. And they're the ones that issued these.

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: But you were always off on Saturday and Sunday from work duty detail.

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: So let's say you had a Saturday that you weren't working here in the six months you were here. Can you remember any of the fond recollections that you did on those. . . ?

Olsen: Oh, I would take those pictures on a Saturday, probably.

Anderson: Did you do any, a lot of hiking, probably?

Olsen: Not too much. Just around in the park around here.

Anderson: So, for example, reading? Did they have a library at all?

Olsen: No. They had an educational building that had books and pamphlets and stuff in it.

Anderson: Do you remember, was that used much?

Olsen: There was a lot of people that used it.

Anderson: So usually a Saturday, that's the way you'd spend it, and Sunday you'd go down to church, walk down to Springdale to the church. How about any humorous stories? Can you think of anything funny that happened when you were here? There's got to be one embarrassing moment. Can you remember anybody?

Olsen: No. I can't.

Anderson: Usually that always happens.

Olsen: Yes. You'll have to catch the next guy.

Anderson: Well, that's okay. What else you got here?

Olsen: Well, this is the camp papers, what I've got of them.

Anderson: Oh, my heavens. Now did these camp papers come out weekly?

Olsen: I think it was twice a month, and I wasn't even sure about that.

Anderson: Did they have one of the fellows—I guess they would have—that was in charge of this, and he'd go around and get up all the information and such?

Olsen: Yes. Like him. There's one that's got the people that done that.

Anderson: Boy, this is fascinating! A person-by-person note on each person, what they're doing.

Olsen: That's the gang that went home on March 31st.

Anderson: Oh, this is clever.

Olsen: Here's the staff right there.

Anderson: Here's the staff, and it says right here "bi-monthly." It was put out right here in the park?

Olsen: Right in the camp.

Anderson: They must have had this right out of the captain's building that had all the . . . ?

Olsen: Recreation.

Anderson: That's where they put this thing together.

Olsen: Recreation building. That's about all I got.

Anderson: I'm very impressed. Keeping this. I'm worried about these blowing away in the wind.

Olsen: I've got one from Salina, too, but I couldn't find it.

Anderson: Do you remember much about Captain Whitney?

Olsen: No, he was just a short—well, he wasn't too short—but he was short and dark, and he was really a fine guy.

Anderson: It says here he has probably the longest continuous command of a CC company in the history of Fort Douglas district. Was he fair with the men?

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: When you'd have a grievance—and I'd imagine there's got to be some fist fights and stuff with young men?

Olsen: Well, there wasn't too much.

Anderson: Wasn't there, really?

Olsen: I don't think so. They all got along all right. They might get in an argument, but . . .

Anderson: They didn't have . . .

Olsen: . . . they didn't have no fights.

Anderson: Again, we hear stories of the CC men coming into town and getting in with the ruffians in town.

Olsen: Well, that's right.

Anderson: 'Cause, you know, they would resent you for all the girls that you had . . .

Olsen: That's just like it would be everywhere. These people would gang up on the *town* gang if they had to.

Anderson: Did that ever happen while you guys were here? Did you ever get in anything like that?

Olsen: I wasn't in it, but I know it happened here.

Anderson: It happened here.

Olsen: It happened in some of the other spots, too.

Anderson: Probably goes on here. Anything else that you can think of?

Olsen: Well, everybody knows that he got killed in the war.

Anderson: Yes. He looks like— Now, as far as the commanding officer, okay, we had the captain, and under him, what did we have?

Olsen: We had a first lieutenant, yes, he was the first lieutenant. His name was Nockem.

Anderson: Okay. And then under him, we had here?

Olsen: Well, under him would be the sergeant, and then you had a company clerk.

Anderson: Did they do a lot of training how to move the shovels, or did they just say, "There's the mountain, and we want you to move the dirt down?"

Olsen: Well, these part of the people that knew how to work a shovel. (chuckle)

Anderson: I know, but did they come up there and do a lot of surveying? Do you remember?

Olsen: Oh, no. They just said to start up here and dig and just make it a gradual slope.

Anderson: Did you use any explosives or any machinery in your work here?

Olsen: Well, we didn't, but they had guys that would do that.

Anderson: So, let's say you came into a big rock. Would one of the men return and call in for another group?

Olsen: If it had to be moved, they'd move it. If it didn't, it's still sitting up there.

Anderson: (laughs) Okay. So that wasn't your job; your job was actually digging in the dirt.

Olsen: Just sloping banks.

Anderson: Any accidents happen while you working near there?

Olsen: No, I can't remember of any in any of the camps.

Anderson: They had a doctor, I'm sure, here.

Olsen: Oh, yes. Dr. Anderson was here.

Anderson: You never had to go and see him for anything?

Olsen: Well, the camp got flu that winter. They had a whole slew of them out in the infirmary.

Anderson: How did they treat that flu? Do you remember?

Olsen: They just took the ones that was sick and took them away and put them in a different building and then doctored them, I guess, with aspirin and whatever they had.

Anderson: On the other question, did anybody die while you were—anybody that you know?

Olsen: Not while I was here.

Anderson: Why did they make the decision to move into Bryce for that time? Did they voluntarily ask people to go to Bryce?

Olsen: Well, they moved the whole camp to Bryce.

Anderson: They just walked up and said, “Tomorrow. We’re moving tomorrow to Bryce,” and pack up your things and away?

Olsen: And away you go.

Anderson: How did they move you?

Olsen: In the trucks.

Anderson: Were they open trucks like the army trucks?

Olsen: The ones we moved in was a ton-and-a-half truck with a cover over them. But these around here—they didn’t have no cover on them. We just rode in the dump trucks.

Anderson: Boy, you couldn’t get away with that nowadays with all the safety.

Olsen: No.

Anderson: Well, the question I’m going to ask you is, now that you look at it, was it a good time? Do you feel like the time that you had here was worth your months that you worked here?

Olsen: Oh, yes.

Anderson: Other than just the fact that, I know it was a paycheck and it was a meal, but it was worth it?

Olsen: Oh, yes. You met lots of people that you’d never forget. Course, you might not know them now.

Anderson: Do you feel like it changed any of the way you turned out? You got to have turned out good because you're still around.

[Tape goes silent.]

Anderson: Winding up, is there anything else that you would like to add to this that you can think of?

Olsen: No. I don't.

Anderson: The question I'm going to ask If the conditions were right, would this be a good program today?

Olsen: Yes. I think there's a lot of them that should be here. (Laughs)

Anderson: That's one of the things, I mean, that's a good point because I'm like yourself; I feel that there are values that you learned here that we could certainly use in our day-to-day lives now. I feel like one of the facts of why this program was so advantageous is it made people learn how to work.

Olsen: Yes, that's right.

Anderson: And one of your opening statements, you said that there wasn't a lot of goldbricking—I mean, people were not sat on like a chain gang. You didn't have people say, "Okay, I want you to move this, and move so much dirt." So that meant that you were kind of on your own.

Olsen: Yes, we were on our own. We had a boss down at the bottom, but—.

Anderson: Back to the point I was trying to make is the fact that you then learned from your own experiences how to work.

Olsen: Yes.

Anderson: So for that reason, what the whole program encompassed, even besides the projects that you did, is that it made better people out of the individuals.

Olsen: Well, I think so.

Anderson: Well, I appreciate it. We're just talking with Ferrell Olsen. And where were you again from, Ferrell?

Olsen: Richfield.

Anderson: And you were here in 1936.

Olsen: And '37.

Anderson: Here in Zion, and you were moving dirt off the gradient slope off of the switchbacks.
Well, I appreciate it. I really do.

[End of interview.]