

**Milton Widdison**  
**Zion National Park Oral History Project**  
**CCC Reunion**  
**September 28, 1989**

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Wayne Hinton: September 28, 1989, interviewing Milton Widdison in conjunction with the CCC reunion in Zion. Milton, you said you were scheduled for tomorrow.

Milton Widdison: Yes, I think I'm going to leave tomorrow. If I could do it now, in case something comes up then.

Wayne Hinton: Okay, what I've tried to do is pick up the registration sheet on each of the guys I was interviewing. I don't have one for you so you'll have to tell me a little about your background.

Milton Widdison: Well, I came down here to Zion in July 1934 and I was in the camp, 1966 was the number of it. I was born up in Hooper, Utah, and graduated from high school in 1934. That was the year of the great drought. I grew up out there on the farm. We had no irrigation water and it didn't seem like there was going to be that much activity around to keep me home and this word about the CC camps came along and it sounded fun to me. So I enlisted and came down here with a group from Ogden. Our camp was Ogden, Nephi, Eureka, that was basically the group that we had.

Wayne Hinton: I was just talking to a guy from Hurricane who came in 1934. It seemed to him like most the guys in the camp were from Ogden that year.

Milton Widdison: These Hurricane or Washington County boys came in a little later after we had been down here a while. We had a good bunch of kids in at that time. There were always a few who were different like there always are, but basically we had a good, solid bunch of guys at camp.

Wayne Hinton: You were in one of the earliest groups then if you came in '34.

Milton Widdison: I only enlisted for six months, and I liked it. I had fun. I'd been working on the farm all the time; I didn't know you didn't have to work for your living. I didn't mind the work and all the food you wanted to eat, and I couldn't be in a more beautiful place. I learned to love Zion's Canyon.

Wayne Hinton: You been back since?

Milton Widdison: I've been back many times. In fact, here a few years ago we made quite a bit of news, local and national news, by getting caught in a flood down the Zion Narrows. I and my two boys, one was ten and one was seven. My friend has boys eight and nine. We were the ones that were actually caught in the water up there.

Wayne Hinton: August 1962?

Milton Widdison: It was on Labor Day weekend.

Wayne Hinton: It was '62 wasn't it, along there?

Widdison: I don't think; I'm not sure. My seven year old now is I think 32, so it was like 25 years ago.

Hinton: That would make it 1964.

Widdison: Two years before that some scouts had been caught and there were some casualties.

Hinton: They lost some four or five kids.

Widdison: We didn't lose anyone. I was in the group led by Otto Fife, Sheriff Fife. We were due to get into Zion at the Temple of Sinawava on Sunday morning and we got in Tuesday night. The first person we saw when we got down lower was a man. He said, "I'm from *Life Magazine*; I'm a photographer." We had no idea that anyone but our families even knew that we were missing. We were celebrities when we got down there at the Temple of Sinawava.

Hinton: Did you ever make that hike when you were in the CCC camp?

Widdison: Not all the way; we walked up along there. I've climbed everything in the canyon, I think. We used to take a hike every Saturday, climbed the East Rim, West Rim, Angels Landing, I don't remember the names of all of them.

Hinton: Did you work on some of the trails?

Widdison: I didn't work on trails. I worked a lot on the rock trimming at the area of erosion controlling the Virgin River. And I worked as a plumber's assistant there for a time and learned a lot about plumbing.

Hinton: Did that become your trade?

Widdison: No, it didn't actually. But I picked up enough that I have been able to do a lot of plumbing at home and stuff.

Hinton: So it was worthwhile, kind of as a lay vocation.

Widdison: Another thing that I picked up. At that time we had military chaplains come and hold church services, and I got acquainted with Emerson Curtis and Ted Curtis, they were chaplains, and George Woolley. So I knew a little bit about the military chaplains, see, and so when World War II was starting to approach I thought, "Well that would be a good thing to get into" and so I applied and was accepted in the military as an Army Chaplain in 1941. That was before the war had started. I was on active duty up in Fort Warren, Wyoming when the Pearl Harbor came, and I was shipped off to the Pacific. I spent forty-four months out there. But I had a good career as a military chaplain. I had five years World War Two and then I stayed in the Reserve for 35 years and retired.

Hinton: I already imagine most of the kids in the east camp . . . Was there a west camp when you were here?

Widdison: They built the one across the site when I was here, but I was in the one that was built first.

Hinton: Most those kids were Utah kids?

Widdison: Yes.

Hinton: Most of them were LDS?

Widdison: Yes.

Hinton: Did you have LDS Chaplain?

Widdison: Yes, these were LDS Chaplain's, both Curtises. They were LDS and of course they were in the general services.

Hinton: Sure.

Widdison: The first Sunday down in Springdale you couldn't get inside the chapel.

Hinton: Because all the CCC boys went down?

Widdison: Yes, as time went on, there were less and less. There were a few of us that kept going all the time.

Hinton: Would you have to walk to Springdale?

Widdison: Yes, we'd walk down; it's a nice mile and a half walk or whatever.

Hinton: So in addition to the rif-raffing or trimming along the river and the plumbing, were there some other things that you did?

Widdison: Cutting cedar posts up at the upper part of the park. One winter we spent a lot of time up there.

Hinton: Those were years.....

Widdison: They were going to build a camp down at Moapa, Nevada, and I went along as one of the, what they call the "cadre" on that down to Moapa, [Nevada]. I spent some time down there. We stayed until they started building actually and then they shipped us back up to Arizona on the Arizona Strip, and I was over there for a time. And then after that, they had hauled lumber in before they started building and moved us into St. George for a short time, and then up to Cedar City. And up there, we were going to Cedar Breaks clearing the snow and opening up Cedar Breaks. Opening up that road through, digging through drifts ten to twelve feet deep.

Hinton: They don't do that anymore.

Widdison: No.

Hinton: Pretty much just let it melt.

Widdison: There's an easier way than to dig it out with a shovel too.

Hinton: Yes, you were just doing it with a shovel?

Widdison: Yes, we were just using shovels. All we had was a shovel. We didn't know about all these modern day, easier way to do things. It was, you know, a good experience.

Hinton: When you were doing snow removal at Cedar Breaks where did you camp?

Widdison: Well, we would travel back and forth out of Cedar City.

Hinton: Oh, you'd go to town and then go back up.

Widdison: Then when I got out, we were living up at I think it's called Duck Creek

Hinton: That's right.

Widdison: I don't remember just what kind of work we were doing, but I was discharged up there and went home in the fall of '35 and helped get the crops in and then went a mission to Germany.

Hinton: So you were in the CCC for what, 15 months?

Widdison: Fifteen months. And coincidentally, I figured my family was using the twenty-five dollars a month, when in reality they were not. They were putting it aside for me. So my 15 months worth of twenty-five dollars went into the bank and kept me in Germany for half of my mission.

Hinton: For your mission?

Widdison: Half of my mission was paid for.

Hinton: You served a 30 month mission?

Widdison: Yes. Over there at the time Adolf Hitler was just coming into full bloom. It was a wonderful time historically to be over there. But I always thought the CCC experience was a very good one.

Hinton: One of the guys, not in an interview, we were just talking, and he said that first bunch of kids, those guys from Ogden, he said they were really a good bunch. He said you could just leave your wallet on the bed, nobody would ever touch it, you knew it would be there when you came back. With 200 guys, that's saying quite a bit.

Widdison: I think we didn't have a bunch of losers in that group. There might have been some but basically we had a pretty solid group of kids. Later on down at Moapa, I was, as promotions went then they had leaders and assistant leaders and I was an assistant leader.

Hinton: So you were making \$36.00?

Widdison: I was making \$36.00. We had a bunch of kids from Brooklyn and there was not a dime worth of work out of these kids. They were goof-offs.

Hinton: Was there anything they could do to induce them to work?

Widdison: Well, I was the one out there inducing but it was easier for me to do it than to try and get them to do it.

Hinton: You couldn't discipline them?

Widdison: No, well we didn't, we weren't involved that long. It was enough for me. I didn't want to have to run this bunch of guys for a long time. Course back then it was an 18 year old kid trying to...

Hinton: They probably being city kids, they hadn't done much physical work.

Widdison: They didn't come out here with the idea of work. They didn't have an idea that they needed to work or wanted to work. That was just another experience.

Hinton: You could lean on one end of the shove.

Widdison: It didn't matter much.

Hinton: Not if they weren't going to work. Did you think the kids in the camp here at Bridge Mountain worked pretty well? Didn't they call this the Bridge Mountain Camp? Maybe they didn't. Later on they did. You can see the bridge up there.

Widdison: Yes, that's the same bridge; in fact I've got a picture of that bridge. This other camp across the river was built later and I never did know much about that. I don't know whether they were Utah kids or not.

Hinton: What they did I think was when they built the second camp was they moved the Utah kids to the other side of the river and then they put the out of state kids in the first camp.

Widdison: Yes, I'd forgotten that.

Hinton: Yes, that's what they did.

Widdison: Yes, well I guess I did move across the river then. But it was the good old days. I don't think this kind of program would go over too well today. I don't think kids who didn't have anything to do would want to do work for practically nothing.

Hinton: Well in those days, it was a blessing to have a job.

Widdison: Oh, yes.

Hinton: Kids were anxious to find anything. I interviewed a guy a while ago and he said he was riding the rails until he went into the CCC. He said there were times he didn't have anything to eat.

Widdison: Well I remember, I grew up on the farm there in Hooper and we had raised sugar beets and tomatoes and milk cows and things like that and we would do all of our work. I remember a time or two riding all day all over town to try to find someone to pick tomatoes for us for a nickel a bushel. You could work like crazy and pick 40 bushels of tomatoes in a day, you would have two dollars. And that was like manna from heaven. So, we didn't know, we didn't know we were underprivileged.

Hinton: Sure, everybody else was in the same circumstances.

Widdison: I'm not sure that was a bad experience; I think maybe everybody ought to have at least one in their lifetime.

Hinton: I'm afraid it would be pretty rough for us to go to that in this kind of selfish world we live in now.

Widdison: Yes, it would be hard. But, it's a good thing to have gone through back then.

Hinton: So in those 15 months you moved around a lot.

Widdison: Yes, most of the time of the 15 months, I probably spent about a year of it here.

Hinton: About 12 months right here.

Widdison: Right here in Zion. We'd drive from being up to the Temple of Sinawava, you know in the truck mornings and night.

Hinton: And you'd do that working the river up there?

Widdison: Yes, and I never ceased to be amazed riding up in the back of the truck looking at these mountains. We've been back many, many times.

Hinton: So you were in the back an open truck? So you watched the landscape as you drove by.

Widdison: Yes, I think this was a lucky assignment.

Hinton: Yes.

Widdison: A lot of camps, well they were up the mountain fighting forest fires or something and living in tents, had it tougher than we did.

Hinton: You never did have to fight any fires.

Widdison: No, I didn't have to fight any fires.

Hinton: Did they give you firefighting training?

Widdison: No, only in the camp. I remember I was the nozzle man on the fire hose in our firefighting brigade down here. But we did other things like I remember digging in the campground. It was right around in this area; I remember we spent plenty of time digging up the lines, the water line.

Hinton: I imagine they probably were water lines for the water tank.

Widdison: So we spent a few, maybe a few weeks digging trenches for them. Besides the ones I've mentioned, there were other, maybe two days at a time we would get assignments.

Hinton: Were there ever any days in the winter time when it was too cold or too stormy to work? Did you miss work days?

Widdison: No, I don't remember. Well I guess, let's see I would have only spent one full winter here and a lot of that time we were up there cutting cedar posts. And we were in deep snow up there.

Hinton: Yes, you were at a higher elevation.

Widdison: Yes.

Hinton: So you would leave the camp here and drive up there?

Widdison: Up through the tunnel.

Hinton: You'd leave here with just a skiff of snow?

Widdison: Yes, and the smell of the exhaust from the truck as you would go through the tunnel, it really smelled up the truck.

Hinton: In the winter time, did they cover the back of that truck?

Widdison: Yeah. They would put these canvas covers on the army, well I guess they weren't army trucks, but they were the equivalent of army trucks. They seemed like big trucks. Now, I have pictures of them and now they look like something out of a museum.

Hinton: Did you bring some pictures with you?

Widdison: Yes, in fact they copied a lot of mine. I kept the pictures and I put them in an album and I've got a lot of good pictures from back then.

Hinton: Did you look at the pictures that they had posted here?

Widdison: I didn't get a chance to really take a close look at them.

Hinton: You ought to take a look at those and see if there is anything you can add to the captions.

Widdison: Yes. They copied quite a few of mine, took some of the pictures from my album.

Hinton: Did you see some guys here today that were in that camp, '34-'35?

Widdison: Yes, there's about 8 or 10 of us over here. Well just before you came, an hour or so ago there was about 10 of us all from up in that area. We got together and I got a picture of the group.

Hinton: Reminisced a little bit.

Widdison: Yes, we've been having a good time over there.

Hinton: Well that's good, that's what the reunion is all about.

Widdison: Yes, I think this is great. I didn't know whether I'd get down here and if there would be three people here. I'm amazed at how many showed up.

Hinton: When we had our last committee meeting, we had 52 pre-registered, so we knew it was going to be a big turnout.

Widdison: My wife wasn't able to come; she got in a bad car accident a few days ago.

Hinton: Is she in the hospital?

Widdison: Well, they took her to the hospital for x-rays and things, but she's actually been released. Her eyes are swollen up and she has a bad bump on her head and her neck and shoulders are bad.

Hinton: Well, that's too bad.

Widdison: Yes. We had an '89 Mercury Sable that we've only had a month and it had only 2,000 miles on it and I think it's totaled out.

Hinton: That's heartbreaking.

Widdison: Yes, that's hard on automobiles. But it can happen so fast. She was stopped at an intersection [at a] red light and a car came through and hit her. So we don't know.

Hinton: Took the turn wide?

Widdison: I don't know just exactly what happened. The police report wasn't in and the eye witnesses have varying stories, but I think probably the other car would be cited or something because she was stopped.

Hinton: When you were here in the camp, I guess you had medical doctors that took after your needs?

Widdison: Yes.

Hinton: Did you ever have a need for their services?

Widdison: No, I was young and healthy then.

Hinton: I suppose most of the guys were, weren't they?

Widdison: Yes, they had sick call everyday, but I think most of the guys, well there was probably some colds. I don't think there was a lot of sickness in the camp.

Hinton: Do you remember who the doctor was?

Widdison: I don't remember his name. I remember the commander was Captain Kennedy, the first sergeant . . . .

Hinton: Was Kennedy pretty gung ho military?

Widdison: He was like a little *banty rooster*.

Hinton: He got you out for calisthenics and the whole deal

Widdison: Yes, we had some calisthenics and formations. He wasn't very inclined much to get down on our level. He was more the administrative type to keep things going. I never heard what happened to him after. I suppose he stayed in and maybe stayed military or whatever.

Hinton: Your project supervisors where not military though, they were local people and maybe even in some instances park service personnel.

Widdison: Bill Miller was one that was heading the work up here where I was spending a lot of my time. Did you ever hear any mention of Bill Miller?

Hinton: Yes, I heard him mentioned.

Widdison: Then there was someone I worked for, a Cannon.

Hinton: Probably from St. George

Widdison: From St. George. In fact I saw him a few times after and I think the Cannons are still in the plumbing business over there. But one day the dad, he was always kind of, I liked him.

Hinton: George, George Cannon

Widdison: George Cannon is that what I said?

Hinton: Yes, you said Cannon.

Widdison: I remember one of the sayings, "Will you hold this wrench while I think?" But I liked him. I got acquainted a little bit with some of his family. I've always had a soft spot for St. George and Southern Utah in general. We bought a place in St. George, kept it for several years thinking someday we might want to come down here at least in the winters but it finally got to the point that, we had it rented, and every time I was down here I was either working on it or feeling guilty that I wasn't, so we sold it, sold it with nothing down and the interest was more than the rent used to be.

Hinton: And now you don't have to work on it.

Widdison: I come down now and enjoy it. My wife's sister is Park Ranger over Snow Canyon.

Hinton: For the state?

Widdison: Yes, are you from this area down here?

Hinton: Yes, I was born in St. George and raised in Hurricane and I teach at Southern Utah State College in Cedar City.

Widdison: Lois Lange; she worked there in the state park in Cedar City and now is in Snow Canyon. So we still have reason to come here.

Hinton: So you live up in Salt Lake?

Widdison: Salt Lake. I went back and got a master's degree in Social Work, and I worked at a veteran's hospital as a social worker for about 25 years. I'm still a farmer at heart and still don't know what I'm going to do when I grow up. I've had a fun life.

Hinton: Did you have a chance last night or today to drive up in the canyon and look at some of that work?

Widdison: No, but I've been up there a lot of times.

Hinton: You can still see the results of what you did years ago.

Widdison: My daughter and granddaughter are here with me. This daughter's from Somalia and they're going home later. I'll have to take them up and show them some of the things that we did back when.

Hinton: Well, that will be interesting for them. It's nice to have worked on something that you can still see the results.

Widdison: Yes, I was amazed so many years after to go up there and say hey I remember how we labored to get the particular rock in. Some of those rocks were pretty big. We used crowbars and pipe rollers and things to get them in.

Hinton: Oh you used rollers then?

Widdison: Yes.

Hinton: Worked them along. You didn't have hoists or anything like that?

Widdison: At times they at a bulldozer, but we did a lot of just manual labor to switch them over into where they had to go.

Hinton: Good old, hard back-breaking work.

Widdison: Yes, you know it's good to see something that's endured for half a century, and probably it was a good idea when it was thought up.

Hinton: Yes, it's probably saved a lot of erosion. Where there some guys working on re-vegetation projects and re-forestation?

Widdison: I remember a little of that.

Hinton: Transplanting?

Widdison: I don't remember our group being too involved in it, but it could have been. I didn't ever get in on any of that.

Hinton: Well Milton, I appreciate your spending this time with me. Is there anything else you can think of that we ought to touch on?

Widdison: I'll think of a lot of things I should have brought up later.

Hinton: Fifty-four years ago is a long time to remember.

Widdison: Well, what is amazing to me is that after this many years this many guys get together.

Hinton: Yes, well that probably tells you something about how they still think rather positively about the experience.

Widdison: We had a reunion up in Ogden. Well, this was different people up in that area, they invited me up to talk to them here a few. You can turn that off if you want.

Hinton: Let's leave it on.

Widdison: Well, they invited me up to talk. We took a trip around the world here a few years ago and they invited me up to show them the slides and talk to them. I met with them a couple times and they could never really get anything off the ground. I don't know if they are still trying or not. I showed them the trip slides and I copied a bunch of my pictures from here. I made slides of a bunch of pictures from down here and showed them along with them trying to refresh some of the things that fit into Zions. But that group up there was anyone in the CC from that general area. I don't think they are still trying to keep it going. They were trying to get together a few times a year. Too many people have too many things they are involved in.

Hinton: It seems like as your family gets older, you have more family responsibilities.

Widdison: I was counting the other day and I've been in 31 different countries.

Hinton: You probably never dreamed that would happen when you were in the CCC's

Widdison: No, never. Our daughter was in Pakistan when our little granddaughter was born and we went over there and that's half way around, so we made a nine week trip around the world then. We've been to Europe, back to Germany and places three or four or five times, been to Hawaii several times, and down to New Zealand and Tonga and Samoa. This is all since we retired ten years. We've been fully retired for ten years and we've both been healthy enough that we could do some traveling. We thought while we could do it we better do it.

Hinton: Well, that's good.

Widdison: Wonder what that automobile accident is going to subtract.

Hinton: All right, well thanks a lot

Widdison: Okay, well I probably took too much of your time on the tape, but it is fun to talk.

[End of interview.]