

METAMORPHOSIS
Civilian Conservation Corps
Camp S-1, Co. 1793, Keystone South Dakota (Pine Creek)

As one looks back on the decisions made throughout a lifetime, it is rare that one can identify a decision that changed a journey and influenced a lifetime destination. One of these came to Jimmie on March 9th, 1934, when he filled out an application given to him by Mr. Burwyn. "I lied about the year I was born to get into the CCCs. I was seventeen, but they required me to be eighteen, so I said I was born in 1915 instead of 1916. That was just a tiny lie . . . I'd be eighteen in October." *And so began the metamorphosis . . .*

Eugene James Elie, aka Jimmie/Jim, was the middle child of five--two older sisters and two younger brothers. In 1934, times were very tough on the family farm in St. Onge, South Dakota. The older sisters were married with families of their own, and they, too, were struggling. On April 14th, 1934, Jim walked into Camp S-1, Co. 1793, CCC, Keystone, South Dakota, aka Pine Creek Camp, as a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. He was all of 5 feet 6 1/2 inches tall and weighed 104 pounds, but farm work had made him strong. He would be wiry all his life, and although he grew to be almost 5 feet 9 inches, he rarely passed the 130-pound mark. Jim, like most of the young men who enrolled in the CCCs, was under twenty, single, hadn't completed high school, and had no marketable skills. He had completed the tenth grade and then had to go to work to help support his family, as his father was incapacitated for long periods of time due to pulmonary tuberculosis that he contracted as a miner in the Black Hills' Homestake gold mines. His father had been admitted to the Modern Woodmen of America Sanatorium in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on April 25th, 1934, but it was too late for medical help, and death came three days later. *Providence had closed one door for the Elie family, but another one had been opened . . .*

Jim was asked to share his experiences about this time and what it meant to him. Grinning, "The CCCs took me, a young whippersnapper, a little snot-nosed boy, and turned me into a man. Not a very big man, at that! (laughing at himself). What do I remember foremost? Oh, the hard work, of course, and the food. We had food . . . lots of food--plenty to eat. The cooks were really good and baked pies, cakes, and made doughnuts for us. Funny, I remember the doughnuts the most--all warm and smelling so good. I thought they were great back then, but I don't eat them now. . . not much for sweets." Sweetly smiling, "Ahh . . . but I do love a cup of hot black coffee and a piece of warm apple pie."

Thinking back, he thoughtfully shared, "Oh, I don't remember being hungry before the CCCs because, on a farm, there is usually food to eat, but maybe not a lot. We didn't have pies and cakes much, except on special occasions. My mom was a pretty good cook, though I don't think she liked it much. At camp, we had a cafeteria and sat at wooden tables. We had all of the food we wanted to eat, and boy, did we all eat! I didn't gain any weight, though." Laughing at the irony, "Was skinny then, and I'm skinny now." He paused and remembered . . .

"We didn't have tents like some of the other camps. We had barracks with wooden bunk beds and a wood-burning stove in the center. Emm . . . don't remember who slept near the stove. Not me. I was about halfway down from the stove, but I kept warm all right. Yeah, I slept real good, too. No one cared if someone snored. We were all just too tuckered out to care."

Jim smiled and then grimaced when he related a typical day, "Like the Army. We were awakened at 5 a.m. by one of the head guys who yelled at us to get up. If you didn't wake up right away, he would stand right by your bunk and yell--that usually did the job! We had an hour to get awake, shave, shower, and get dressed." Snickering, "It didn't take me as long as some of the others . . . I didn't have anything to shave! At 6 a.m., we mustered out in the area in front of our barracks for the flag ceremony and roll call. We then went back into the barracks to make everything shipshape. Then on to breakfast. After breakfast, it was work, work, and more work, except 'bout an hour for lunch. Supper depended on where and what we were working on, but we usually ate about 5 p.m. Then it was free time! Lights out at 10 p.m."

Evenings and weekends were the boys' free time. "We worked hard and liked to play hard. Oh, you know what playing hard means. It means," he chuckled, "we tried to do a WHOLE lot in a VERY short time."

They did what young men usually did--they explored the forest and entered into games of competition (baseball, football, basketball, or boxing). "Some boys liked to be by themselves and read. I know some took classes, and some just slept. But mostly, if you weren't playing some game, you visited the nearby towns to meet girls by going to a dance or the movies. We were only paid a dollar a day, and \$25 was sent home to help the family, so we had to be careful with our money, but if there was any way . . . we were on our way to town. Of course, when you get a passel of boys together and throw in some good ol' boys from another camp, well, there were fights."

Smiling and nodding his head as he reminisced, "Boy, were there fights! Two kinds, yeah, two kinds--the ring kind--boxing, and the fun kind--fighting. If there was a beef between our guys, it was settled in the ring. Didn't happen much. Everyone got along real good. Our camp had a couple of really good fighters. Brothers--professional boxers--the Nisson boys. . . Emm, I think that was their name . . . long time ago. Anyway that's what we called them--the Nisson boys. Harold was older--don't remember the youngun's name. One was a big heavyweight; the other smaller. They would fight other camps in competition. Us guys liked to watch that. Don't remember how many we won, but I know of a couple. Can you believe it? (laughing out loud) I tried it a couple times, only in Pine Creek though, but all I got was a couple of black eyes; boy were they beauts! They lasted a long time." Jim's love of boxing, initiated in the CCCs, continued for his whole life. There weren't many weekends when he didn't watch some bout or another; early on, they were live contests, but later on television.

"Goin' into town, we changed from our work 'blues' to green pants and jacket, umm . . . think it was leftover Army. We tried to get as many guys into the back of the truck that would fit. We wouldn't go to Keystone . . . too small--went to Rapid (Rapid City) on Friday night in a Dodge truck with about 20 guys hanging on in the back. Trying to stay on was always a problem, ya know, rough, bumpy roads--never fell off though. Yep, sometimes one or two did. We'd stop and pull them back on. This little bitty short, fat guy that drove the truck was in charge of us. His name was "Shorty" Crandall--I believe his name was Carl. He had to sit on a pillow so he could see to drive. He could sure drive that truck though. He was a good guy; not bossy but he'd get real upset when the Pine Creek boys got into a fight. Fights in town were usually between camps. You know, girls. Always seem to be the girls. Hmm, that Harold though . . . (shaking his head) There would be a couple of CCC boys fighting, and Harold would tap one on the shoulder and sweetly ask, 'You mind me getting in this fight?' Then BAM! Ha-ha, he sure liked a good fight."

"Dances at Keystone and Rapid City were popular 'cause that's where the gals were. The girls in the city were always a drawing card . . . ya know? Pick one . . . never know exactly what ya get--kinda like playing poker," he laughed. This was something else that the CCCs taught Jim. . . playing poker. "I learned poker at camp. I learned to play real good . . . but mostly smart. I worked too damn hard for my money not to be smart about what I done with it." Nodding, "Life lesson learned. If you can't throw it away, don't take it out of your pocket to gamble . . ." Pausing, "Be smart and count your cards! You know what I mean, right?" He passed this philosophy and skill on to his daughter, as there were always friendly poker games at their house over the years. He would only let her play when he thought he had taught her, "The right way to play cards and bet." Betting horse races was another skill Jim had. He had yearned to be a jockey as a young man, but "life doesn't always give you what you want." Another philosophical tidbit he lived by and shared with his daughter. Just about every time the two of them went to the Del Mar races, he would reminisce about how he had yearned to be a jockey. Once again, Jim wouldn't let her bet a race until he had taught her about jockeys, racehorses, and the 'ins and outs' of a racing form. Over the years, he became friends with many jockeys, which fulfilled some of his dreams.

Jim was a good dancer, so even though he was somewhat small, he was popular with the girls. He danced all his life. What began as a young man lasted until he was well into his late 80's. "I always said I was a 'dancin' fool.' (Laughing and eyes twinkling) Ruby and Mignon (his sisters) kinda helped me learn and I learned by watching others. Taught me pretty good, like a good dancer should (laughing). Dad was

an Oddfellow, and they had dances down at the Oddfellow's Hall in St. Onge. I was a pretty good dancer, and the girls liked to dance with me . . . that helped me get better (Laughing out loud). The CCC guys always wanted me to go with them when they went dancin' 'cause the gals liked to dance with me. I guess I was like a fishing lure. Sure had a good time."

The boys from the Black Hills knew how to fish, and Jim was no exception. In fact, he was known as a really good fisherman, just like his father. "Dad didn't teach me how to fish though . . . never figured out why," in a voice tinged with regret. "Ol' Man Cardinal and also some other farmers used to take me fishing with them . . . think they felt sorry for me 'cause of Dad being sick all the time. Emm . . . well, hey. . . maybe they just liked me! Don't know how I learned all of those fishin' tricks, but I used them in CCCs. I was good at it and could catch a batch. I taught the guys from the flats how to fish. We (Pine Creek boys) had fish fries. We'd fish the dams 'n' rivers n' save the fish; go get a couple of fry pans from Cook and some lard. That's all we needed. Go below the dam and fry the fish." Frying fish became his specialty. All through his life, he fished and did the fish frying. He taught his daughter to fly fish in Spearfish Canyon, South Dakota; continued fishing with her in the high Sierras, the Pacific Ocean, and Idaho, and although he always wanted to fish in Alaska, it was his daughter and his grandson's namesake, Jimmie, who fished Alaska in his name. "I think that all of the fishing I did as a boy and in the CCCs, taught me to not only be a good fisherman but (laughing out loud and puffing up), ah, if I do say myself. . . a great fisherman."

In addition to fishing, pastimes for the Pine Creek boys were hiking up into the hills, looking for pretty rocks, whittling diamond willow walking sticks, and making lamps out of canes and Diamond Willow. "Ya know boys . . . if ya don't keep 'em busy, they find stuff to do, 'n' it all isn't always good. So we had to have somethin' to do, you know." Jim made beautiful diamond willow lamps. Two of these lamps, a floor lamp, and a table lamp, are in his daughter's home today.

"My barracks was about a couple hundred yards from Mount Rushmore. The CCCs before me built wooden steps up to the top. I got pictures of it somewhere. We went up there a couple or three times. Hard hike but not too bad--we were strong and young. Everything wasn't done yet, and they were still working on it. We walked out on Washington's head, but not too far. . . dangerous even for the camp 'scaleaways.'"

"We also went up Keystone Draw to get blocks of mica--you know, that rock that peels off in layers--would get some of it for Mom. She thought it was beautiful, so each time we were there, I'd remember to get more for her."

The Black Hills National Forest is known for its herds of buffalo and bighorn sheep. "Ah, there was all kinds of wildlife around the camp--lots of birds, small game, deer, herds of buffalo, sheep, and wild CCC boys," Jim giggled.

Medical issues were always important at the camp. Each enrollee took a first aid course and was expected to maintain healthy behaviors. Pine Creek's doctor was Dr. Allen. "One of my first jobs was clearing the land and getting it ready for the building of Dr. Allen's cabin." Dr. Allen, like many of the leaders, was Army.

Jim's health was compromised when in June 1934, he contracted rubella measles. "No idea how I got the damn thing 'cause no one else was quarantined." For eighteen days, he was quarantined in the camp dispensary. "That's the longest eighteen days I've ever spent in my whole life," he lamented. "For an outside guy, hanging around was punishment . . . Ya know, (chuckling) I like to be moving. One thing I got out of it though, was patience and some learnin' from Doc." When one of the guys working with Jim was bitten by a rattlesnake, "I stayed with him and did what I learned from Dr. Allen. He said I did real good. Weren't many rattlesnake bites 'cause of our boots--they protected our feet and lower legs . . . Ah. . . but not from blisters, though, 'n' I got a batch of 'em until I got them darn ol' boots broken in."

There were church services "sometimes." The boys could go home for a visit about once a month . . . "IF we could get there. I didn't get there much. When Dad died, Mother, Ruby, Si (sister and brother-in-law), and Gordon (brother) came after me for his funeral. We had an accident--a head-on 'n' broke up the car real bad, but no one got hurt. The funeral was on Wednesday, and I was back to work on Thursday--had to borrow a car from the neighbor to get me back to camp."

Off and on during Jim's tenure, he cut cordwood. "Us guys would cut down the timber, saw the wood into four-foot lengths, stack it, and get it ready for pickup by the vendors. It was used in Rapid City for heat." Years later, Jim could still identify the trees in the forest, point out which ones made the best firewood, and estimate how many cords a tree could produce by just looking at it. "For the bridges and trails, we felled the trees, cut off the branches, and then peeled off the bark. We didn't have much machinery. Most of the time, we moved all the logs by hand . . . but if we were really lucky, they'd bring in the skinner to help. To build the foundations of the bridges, they would use this old pile driver. Boy, was it noisy!"

In the summer of 1934, the Midwest was experiencing a heat wave. The Black Hills was full of tinder just waiting for a spark. "They called us in and told us about a wildfire. . . We were needed as firefighters. That didn't seem so bad for us cocky bunch of know-it-alls. I didn't know anyone who had fought a fire, but . . . we hadn't just fallen off the truck yesterday." Grinning, "We were so sure." Chuckling, "Oh boy, did we learn! It was hell, or close enough for this old farm boy. We fought for 72 hours straight. Exhausted. Sleepy. Filthy dirty. On our last legs we were told it was under control . . . always thought that announcement was an answer to all of us younguns' prayers," nodding his head.

The job that Jim was most proud was his contribution to the building of the Black Hills' famous Pigtail Bridges and the Iron Mountain Highway. No, he didn't envision, design, or survey the famous Pigtail Bridges, the highway, or the mountain tunnels--he carried the surveying stakes, the shovels, the pickaxes, the logs, and other surveying, clearing, and building equipment. Snickering, "I was the surveyor's assistant--you know, the gofer and general grunt. I also helped build, clear, and maintain the highway. I lugged logs and then helped spike them in. You can see the spikes . . . they're still there, at least they were the last time I was there. Ya know it was all by hand . . . everything was done by hand . . . my hands and the hands of other CCC boys."

"I didn't think much of it then--just another day's work. I was just a skinny kid when I joined, but that year taught me how to be a man, a good man with goals and values. But ya know? Those Pig Tail Bridges. . . (choked up) ah. . . I have a good feeling that I did something worthwhile that has lasted a long time . . . a lifetime, my lifetime . . . my children and grandchildren can view it and know that their daddy and granddaddy contributed to something beautiful in this old world."

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*Jim's Civilian Conservation Corps legacy wasn't limited to just bridges, highways, and tunnels. Experiences and ideas previously planted before his March 1934 enlistment were cultivated and refined while new ones were introduced and mastered. Throughout his life, these new skills blossomed and became an integral part of the essence of Jim Elie. Being a simple man, it is these simple qualities that remain etched in the fabric of his progeny--reverence for God, loyalty to his friends, passion for learning, pride in a good day's work, obligation in leaving better than what is found, and immense love for family. Contentment in being outdoors is seen in his enjoyment of a quiet day of fishing, the lonely song of the birds, and the howl of the coyote at night. This ordinary man, living an ordinary life, doing ordinary things, was, in reality, an extraordinary man. His legacy continues to live in his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. That seemingly inconsequential choice made in Jim's youth to join the CCCs has had long-term consequences. These life lessons are his legacy, a bequest to his family, and they are ingrained into our lives today.*

*Thank you, Daddy, for being you.*

*Luella Jean  
January 2, 1980*