Edward Cuthrell and the CCC Camp

By Tammy Van Dorp and Christy Winstead

Mr. & Mrs. Edward Cuthrell, Tammy Van Dorp, and Christy Winstead; Mr. Cuthrell holding huge crab taken from Lake Mattamuskeet.

Introduction

By Tammy Van Dorp

On a comfortable summer day, we—Dr. Roy Armstrong, Christy Winstead, and I, Tammy Van Dorp—started our jour-
ney to the small, friendly township of Swan Quarter in Hyde County. Once in Swan Quarter, we ventured on to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Cuthrell. Upon our arrival at the Cuthrells’ lovely mint-green, shingled country home, which is surrounded by fruit trees and gardens, Mrs. Mary Cuthrell warmly greeted us on her porch. After Mrs. Cuthrell ushered us inside, we met Mr. Cuthrell and began our interview with him about his life experiences, especially those days he spent in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Camp at Bell Island and New Holland in the 1930s.

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**Life:** How did you get into the CCC, the Civilian Conservation corps?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** At this time we were in the Depression. It [CCC] was for people who were out of work, needy families. And I happened to qualify.

**Life:** How old were you?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** I was twenty years old. I think I became twenty-one after I joined.

**Life:** Did you join around here?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** Yes. I was lucky [to be able to join locally].

**Life:** Did you have a job before that?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** Oh, yes. I had had several so far as that goes. You’d pick up what you could [jobs] at that time. I was working some at the saw mill and just anything to catch up some of the farmers around here if they needed help. Fifty cents a day, that’s all we got. That sounds terrible, but that fifty cents went a long ways at that time.

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**Life:** I guess most people were out of work. Were there a great number of people without anything to do?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** Well, there wasn’t a whole lot unless you were on the farm or worked on the water at that time. There was very little other industry around here. Some, but not near as much as there is now.

**Life:** Could you tell me just how hard things were back then?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** We were very fortunate, being on the farm. Money was a scarce item. We were very fortunate having enough to eat because we had a large farm. We always had a garden. We always had our chickens and eggs and hogs and cattle. So far as the eating part, we never were hungry at all. But so far as having money to spend for other things, that was hard to come by at this particular time.

**Life:** Clothing and things like that were hard to get?

**Mr. Cuthrell:** It was really hard to come by, and you didn’t have near as many as we have now. If you had a change or two, well, you were doing pretty good. You only had one Sunday suit, and that’s for certain.

**Life:** Tell us about being in the CCC camp.

**Mr. Cuthrell:** It was created to put these people off the streets to work, those that had nothing to do, the needy. And so they joined this camp. And they put you to work under the Army Corps of Engineers. They read you rules and regulations around there—answer role call of a morning, take exercise, and learn a lot of [vocational] things there. And then you went out on what they called a detail. They had a lot of jobs, and in the meantime the government had acquired Lake Mattamuskeet. And so there was a lot of work to be done there.
They had bought land bluff. What they called bluff was on the Sound side down here, and they had to run that line and cut some fire lanes and get all that set up on the lake. And then they had the refuge; all that area was a refuge.

And the New Holland Corporation was a large area in the '20s. Back in '24-'25 and along in there, they had put this pumping plant down there, and they had drained the lake. And so they were farming it [the drained land]. And several people farmed there, and all of them, I think, went broke because it was too big of an operation at that particular time for no more than they could get out of it. They had one real large hog farm down there in the early '20's; that was before they got anything for collards and so that went out. And when the soybeans and corn and things like that they planted in there. They had quite a number of acres in there that they were farming. And then rainy seasons came on, and the pump wasn't sufficient to keep the water out during a bad rainy time. So it went under, and so did the men's money. I helped plant the last crop in there, and we got twelve and one half cents an hour. That's what we got.

They [CCC] had a lot of work to do there. They went all around the lake and cut the line around there and put a fence around it and signed it [posted signs] all good. They began to cut all that away. A lot of places, they sowed seed and three inch grass, things like that. Then, they decided they were going to renovate the old pumping plant, which is now a hotel. And they did. There used to be an old railroad that come in through the Pineywood section down there and went into the plant and that is how they got their fuel. Their coals were in there. That is the way they shipped their things and got in all their supplies, you might say, by putting a railroad in there. So that is one of the things we [CCC] had to do—go in there and pick up that old railroad track.

Then they went to work on the old pumping plant to make a lodge out of it. So all of the equipment had to be taken out of there. The whole thing was renovated, and, like I said, it was a right good size place down there. Oh, and at the back where all the houses are now down behind the canal, there was a little town, you might say, just a little village. And they had a prison camp down there with a lot of prisoners. So we tore down and moved all of those houses and brought some that were renovated out on the canal bank. We raised the ground level, and we hauled a lot of dirt in there. We cut canals, one going out of Engelhard. We cut that for a drain, and then they had Bellaham, which is two miles off of US 264.

The only way the first ones got in and out particularly down there was by boat. Then they cut a lot of fire lanes down there in case of fires. And they used some [heavy] equipment. It was a real experience. And then when we would go back to camp that night, we had crafts. You had just a lot of things if you were interested in bettering yourself or preparing yourself to go out in life again. They had some interesting things to offer. It was a wonderful place to be.

Life: Did they have educational classes like writing?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes, sir. They had a lot of educational classes, vocational, or most anything you wanted.

Life: Were they at night?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes. They had to be at night because we were gone about eight hours a day. So that was at night. That was at your option to take if you wanted to.

Life: Did you stay there in barracks?
Mr. Cuthrell: Yes. We first put up tents. Then when I went in, they had just built barracks over there. So we would tend [maintain] the barracks.

Life: Did the people there build their own barracks?

Mr. Cuthrell: Some did, but it was hard. So I believe they hired some people to do that.

Life: It sounds like it is somewhat like being in the Army.

Mr. Cuthrell: It was similar to the Army; we had Army officers that were in charge. So, yes, it was similar.

Life: Where were the men you were with from?

Mr. Cuthrell: From all over North Carolina and occasionally one from out of North Carolina.

Life: I guess all the men had a favorable attitude toward this?

Mr. Cuthrell: Well, it was like any other place. Some did, and some didn’t. But most of them did. It offered them opportunities that, if utilized, could have helped them through life. I know I have always been around equipment, even when I was about seven years old. Then I got back into equipment in there [CCC], and what I learned there came in handy. After that, I got off the farm and worked with heavy equipment for, all together, about 25 years. I could run any of it and did that for a living for a number of years.

Life: Did that improve your skills?

Mr. Cuthrell: That improved by skills, yes, sir, and I learned a lot there too, the whole operation.

Life: What kind of restrictions were there?

Mr. Cuthrell: They would give you weekend passes, which started Friday and ended early Monday morning around 6:00. And if you weren’t there, you’d better have a very good excuse, or they would give you a discharge for being AWOL or they would restrict you to camp for several weekends or put you on a work detail and make you work after hours. They had quite a bit of restrictions on us.

Life: Did you have any social activities with visitors coming?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes, occasionally, we would have a dance over there or something like that and the public would be invited. You could bring friends. We would just have a good time. We had ball teams—football, baseball, and basketball particularly, some tennis. There was always something to do. Then we were out there on the bay, so in the summer there were swimming lessons, and [they would] teach you CPR, which is quite a bit different now from what it was then. I remember going out on the pier, and they made you put your head on your arm. It was quite different. But there was many a life saved even back then from using that technique. So it wasn’t all that bad.

Life: How was the food?

Mr. Cuthrell: It would be [good or bad] according to your commander most of the time. You [the commander] were allowed so much for food per month, and some officers would feed you a little skimpy to have a little money left over at the end of the day. Then we would have one [an inspecting officer] come in and say, “Them boys need something to eat. They’ve worked hard.” And that officer wouldn’t have any money left over. Ordinarily the food was good.
Life: Did you raise your food?

Mr. Cuthrell: No. We never got into that part. We did a little farming on the lake part, rice and soybeans and things like that.

Life: Did you meet some boys in there who became good friends?

Mr. Cuthrell: Definitely, some of them were married here. I know a lot of people. I know [because they] came from all areas of North Carolina. I know a lot of people turned out real good. Of course, I guess there were some who went the other way. Some have really done well in life.

Life: What project did you work on that you thought was most memorable?

Mr. Cuthrell: I love equipment, so it would have to be equipment. I was either running a [bull-] dozer or grading a road or running a dragline, something mechanical. It was with equipment that I was most naturally inclined, so I guess doing those were my highlights and [playing] baseball.

Life: Did you play on the baseball team?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes, sir. I was on the all-American team in 1937. I had a chance to go play or try out pretty high up, but I didn’t. We had a scout come down and watch a pitcher and myself. I was a catcher at that time. We were supposed to have gone the next year, but neither of us would go.

Life: Did your CCC team play other camps?

Mr. Cuthrell: We played other camps. We might play someone from the Western part of the state. We would meet them part of the way; basketball was the same way.

Life: How long were you in the CCC?

Mr. Cuthrell: About two or two and a half years.

Life: Do you think something like that would be a good idea today?

Mr. Cuthrell: I really do! It aggravates me so much. We’ve got people in the same predicament today as they were then, and they’ve got to have help. Why not put them in something like that and teach them some discipline and give them some responsibility? And you have to pay them anyway; [so why not] pay them for doing something [the CCC work]? They can rehabilitate their own selves. I think it would be a wonderful idea! I really do!

Life: I wonder why the government doesn’t do it.

Mr. Cuthrell: I have often wondered about that. It’s very possible to put these able people to work and give them some responsibility. It would certainly be a big help to them and to other people too.

Another thing I’ve thought about. You’ve got a lot of elderly people, and you’re getting more all the time. And those people, see, could be hired even if you had to have an old bus or something to carry them and distribute them of a morning and pick them up of an evening. There’s a lot of old people out there that needs somebody to cook for them, clean a little bit, nail up windows when it comes cold weather, cut wood, or carry it in or just to look after them. There’s so many things that they could be doing that would be a big help to the com-
munity. They're paying enough out as it is to do that! Wouldn't be anymore!

Life: After you got out of the CCC, what did you do then?

Mr. Cuthrell: Well, I came back on the farm for a very short time, I believe about a year, and then I went into construction. I worked with construction crews until 1941, I believe. I came back on the farm in 1941 and stayed until 1955, and then I left for good at that time. Then I worked on Long Island one year in some housing projects. I hunted some in the lake; then I went with Keech Construction Company and finished out with about 12 years of that. The last 15 years I worked up at the school bus garage. I got on with them when I came out of construction. Worked the last 15 years down there.

Life: When you worked in the construction, would you be operating bulldozers, and that kind of thing?

Mr. Cuthrell: I started operating a bulldozer on this project up here [the bypass], and from then on I was foreman and superintendent.

Life: You mentioned you hunted some in the lake?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes, Lake Mattamuskeet.

Life: Let me get this straight. The lake was drained in the '20's, is that right?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes.

Life: So it wasn't a lake? And there was nothing there?

Mr. Cuthrell: They kept the water down the best they could even until 1930 or 1931 or 1932. I believe it was 1931 when it went under for good.

Life: Were the CCC people involved in getting the water back?

Mr. Cuthrell: No! It comes back natural when you quit pumping out.

Life: So they just quit pumping?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes. The people had canals, all around, that drained into the lake when they were pumping it out and they paid a little tax [for lake water in their canals]. But the CCC camp was not there at all when the hunting was going on. After it went in, then a lot of waterfowl was in here, and they set up certain areas to hunt in. You could put in [at the lodge] to get a blind, if you were lucky, and you would hunt that blind. They would book your parties. About two dollars of it went to them, and you got the rest of it for carrying the party that day. So that went on for several years.

Life: So you were a guide?

Mr. Cuthrell: Yes, I was a guide.

Life: How did you like that?

Mr. Cuthrell: Real Good! I got to meet a lot of people from all walks of life, and I've always enjoyed hunting and enjoyed people, so I really enjoyed it!

Life: What was the main game you would be hunting?

Mr. Cuthrell: Geese and ducks were the two main things.

Life: How deep is the lake?
Mr. Cuthrell: It's a shallow lake; it's not over, ordinarily, about two feet deep.

Life: That's really something, isn't it!

Mr. Cuthrell: It's seven miles wide and 15 miles long.

Life: So it's really shallow?

Mr. Cuthrell: It's a shallow lake. Yes, sir!

Life: What kind of boats do you use in there?

Mr. Cuthrell: We used about a 14- to 15-foot flat-bottomed with an ordinary motor on it. You have to be real particular, or you're liable to hit old driftwood or a stump or something going across there. You eased backwards and forwards across there to go to the [blinds]. All didn't [use boats]! Some could go around the road and walk in. But there were several of us that left off the causeway and would just have to keep feeling your way along until you got a road that you felt pretty certain of and sure of and go that route.

Life: Does the depth of it vary much?

Mr. Cuthrell: No, sir! Very, very little.

Life: So you don't have tides?

Mr. Cuthrell: No, sir. No tides! There’s floodgates in each end of it, in Lake Landing, New Holland, and at Hodge’s Fork [to control the depth]. They can cut the salt water out or let the rain water out or they can just cut it off and hold what they’ve got when they get what they want in there. When the water gets too high in there, you don't have as much food for wildlife to come up, because the water up around these canals will stand over it so high that the grass and stuff can’t come. So they don't like for the water to get very high in there or above normal. And they’ve got a lot of crabs and stuff like that in there. People catch some of the biggest crabs you ever saw. That’s one of them right there [pointing to the mounted crab].

Life: Oh, yes! Boy, that’s a big crab!

Mr. Cuthrell: It was a big crab. We’ve had some bigger than that one. And they catch a lot of fish in there, too! A lot of people fish in there, not commercially. They did allow some commercial fishing in there at one time, but I think it was to pick up the carp and catfish. Other game fish had to be thrown back.

Life: Is there any salt in that water?

Mr. Cuthrell: At times, yes, there’s some salt when they allow the gates to stay up and the water gets low, like a dry spell. If you were to raise those gates, the salt water can go in. A lot of times it might get brackish around part of it, but I don’t think it ever gets real salt.

Life: What do you think are the biggest changes in the way life is, family life, today, and the way it was 50 years ago during the depression?

Mr. Cuthrell: Well, it might sound foolish, [but] people were a lot closer together then. We'll just take this little road here, just this straight piece in here [Credle Road]. We had enough families on here that we even had a little ball team of our own, nine boys. A lot of the houses are already gone. Each person was a farmer down this road, and that was the way we made our living. Each one was occupied with some farm land. One, once in a while, would fish a little bit through the summer with the nets, but [there were] very few of those. But the main
thing in life was that with all the modern equipment and things we’ve got now, I really believe we had more time then than we’ve got now.

*Life:* Is that right?

*Mr. Cuthrell:* Yes! We had three children, and when they were small, I know Mary could dress those children and put the baby in the carriage and go up the road and spend the afternoon. You don’t have that much time anymore. You’ve got washing machines, dryers, ironing, and tractors to mow your lawn. [Back] then the horses and cattle mowed your lawn. You didn’t have that to do. We still have a big garden, which we did then.

But people were naturally closer together. If someone had a sick horse that staggered—you know, it was quite prevalent at that time—or a cow, didn’t make any difference what it was, we would have four or five [neighbors] to come down and there would be somebody to stay with you all night. If there was somebody sick in the community, you didn’t have to worry about help; it was already there. And people were just closer together because you didn’t see many automobiles around, to be honest; so naturally you had to do the walking to get to your things that you wanted to go to, entertainment and things.

I used to play a guitar some. I would sling an old guitar over my shoulder, and we were just liable to walk three or four miles, play for a dance until 11:00, then walk back home. [We attended] candy pullings, parties, and things like that. We just really had a good time; everybody was real close, helpful. Each one worked together, and I never heard tell of anybody starving to death at all. If anybody was hungry and anybody found it out, why, they would give them some meat and bread. They themselves didn’t have a lot to buy fancy clothes and all with, but such as we had at that time, we made do with it.

I don’t think that there was a whole lot of worry, because debts came along, I guess, then like they do now, but wasn’t as great; that’s for sure. But they came along, and a certain amount of them had to be straightened out. I think life was easier, particularly at that time, than it is now, not near as fast.

*Life:* Do you think people are not as helpful to each other, not as close today?

*Mr. Cuthrell:* Not as close or as helpful. Now, we’re blessed in this community; most of us are still fairly close. And if we hear tell of anybody being in distress or sick or something, ordinarily we try to take care of our own. If there’s a funeral and someone dies, there’s plenty of food sent to the home. We’re still helpful, but it’s not as close as it was at this particular time [past]. Because at that time, you couldn’t live alone; that’s just all there was to it. Each one had to help the other and expect help back.

When it was the fall of the year, when you started out [planting], you didn’t have combines and equipment like that then, had old thrashing machines and bailers to take care of your grain and other crops. We owned one and we’d start on this end of the road and all the neighbors just pitched in and worked together. If we started here, why ever how many it took to run the operation, they were there. So we went to the next place and that man was in it, so we helped him too! He helped you too, and that’s the way it went at that particular time.

*Life:* What advice would you offer to these young ladies on how to have a successful, happy life like you have had?

*Mr. Cuthrell:* Well, I don’t know that I can. They’re living in so much different times than what I was.

*Life:* It’s hard to tell them anything!
Mr. Cuthrell: It really is. The thing that I’m deeply concerned with is the morals of the people. Things have gone out of control. [We should] put a curb on things ’cause I think, in the long run, if they adhere to some of the old morals that have been even since Biblical times, far as that goes, I think it’ll lead them to a happier life. Try to understand their fellow man and get along with everybody, real close, but we can still love our enemies. It’s a problem, but we can still do that. That doesn’t mean that I think as much of them [enemies] as I do somebody I’ve never seen or something, but I still love humanity.

And I think that’s one of the great assets of life because with a lot of hatred in your system, you’re killing your own self. That’s just all there is to it. I find that I am better off, enjoy life more than some I see with that in them, but I don’t have it [hate], thank God! And I do love everybody, most of the people. I don’t know of anyone I can’t get along with or don’t get along with. But we all have our inner circle, you know, that are closely knit. That much is true.

It’s according to what they want out of life as to what they’re going to have to set their goals on. And when they think of something that they’ve made up their minds that they really want, then they’ve got to set their minds to working towards that because very few things that amounts to anything, you know, just rides in to you at one time. You’re going to have to be looking, you’re going to have to set a goal, and you’re going to have to try to achieve that goal for what you want. That’s my opinion!

Life: Well, I’d say that’s mighty good advice. What about the importance of money?

Mr. Cuthrell: Even if you’ve got it, you find that there’s something that’s still missing. There’s got to be an inner satisfac-

Conclusion

By Christy Winstead

The Great Depression of the 1930’s necessitated several economic remedies. One of the most interesting and beneficial was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Mr. Cuthrell made the most of being a member of the CCC.

During these hard economic times, when people were glad to work for fifty cents a day, men like Mr. Cuthrell appreciated the opportunity to work in the CCC. In the CCC he learned to work with heavy equipment and other mechanical skills which benefited him so much in later life. He told that he also enjoyed the extracurricular activities, which made life so much more enjoyable in those hard times. For instance, the CCC camp would hold dances; the public would join in these festivities. And Mr. Cuthrell excelled on the camp baseball team; indeed, he became an all-American ballplayer!

Finally, Mr. Cuthrell gave us some good advice. Like many older folks, he is concerned that the morals of today have gone out of control. So he gave us this admonition: “If you adhere to some of the old morals that have been here even since Biblical times, I think they will lead you to a happier life.”