Born on August 9, 1922 to Tay and Jessie (Ryder) Cummins, Dean grew up in Battle Creek, Michigan and graduated from Battle Creek High School in 1940. After high school, Dean attended Albion College in Michigan before enlisting in the U.S. Army in 1942. During WWII, Dean served in France, Belgium, Austria, and Germany before receiving an honorable discharged on December 7, 1945.

He then earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Michigan in petroleum geology, starting as a junior in 1946 and finishing his master's degree in the summer of 1948. His studies included thesis work on the Tendoy Mountain Range in Beaverhead County, Montana and two field seasons in Wyoming and Montana, based out of Camp Davis, just south of Jackson Hole.

His professional career in the oil and gas industry began in New Orleans working for the California Company, hired on at the stupendous salary of $325/month—the going rate at that time. Dean's first assignments consisted of subsurface and stratigraphic work in the Mississippi Salt Basin (Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, and the Florida panhandle), and a short tour of duty on one of the earliest offshore rigs located 20 mile offshore, in about 100 feet of water depth.

In 1953, Dean drilled his first well as an independent geologist, the #1 Vasboe, about 20 miles north of Cutbank, MT. The well was drilled with an old cable tool rig to about 3,000 feet to the Sunburst sandstone. The well had good shows of oil but insufficient quantity at $2 oil to justify completion. However, the bug had bitten him, and through the next few years he drilled a number of wells independently and as a consultant for others.

During those early years as a professional geologist, Dean worked and lived anywhere his job took him, including Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Michigan, Louisiana, Montana, Wyoming, Indonesia, and Australia. He travelled extensively in Europe and the South Pacific. Dean eventually settled in the Rocky