



HOME PAST ISSUES CONTACTS WRITER'S GUIDELINES March 21, 2008



## The Civilian Conservation Corps and The National Forests

By Gerald W. Williams, Forest Service Historian (Retired); updated by Aaron Shapiro, Forest Service Historian

Launched as part of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal after Congress passed a bill authorizing the Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) Act on April 5, 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) made a significant contribution to forestry and the people of the United States.



Called the CCC from the beginning, the name was not officially changed until 1937. The CCC era technically ended on June 30, 1943, but all the camps and personnel had been disbanded and discharged by October 1942. One national emergency, the Great Depression, inspired the CCC while another, the nation's entry into World War II, closed the CCC era.

(left: CCC Camp Tieton, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Wash. 1937. Click to enlarge)

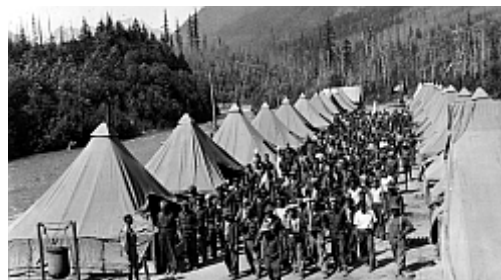
The CCC did far more than simply put people back to work. Few people have full knowledge of the CCC's contributions to the conservation of the nation's natural resources. The massive forest conservation program aided fire fighting and observation, opened large areas of forests through needed trail and road construction, and provided administrative and recreational facilities on forest lands.

This brief overview discusses the conditions that led to the founding of the CCC, the organization of the CCC camps, and the CCC's impressive conservation achievements.

### The Depression Era

The 1920s were a decade of unprecedented growth, prosperity and social change. The rise of the inexpensive, mass produced automobile allowed millions to explore new highways and byways. Farm people flocked to cities to pursue jobs on the production line. Credit expanded, allowing many wage earners to purchase products without ready cash. Stock market speculation, especially through a system of easy credit, was on the increase.

Yet mounting inflation began to erode worker purchasing power and wage increases. At the same time, the nation stepped back from the international scene through a policy of isolationism, exemplified most prominently by Congress' refusal to ratify the League of Nations pact. **(right: CCC Camp Fire Training, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Wash. 1937. Click to enlarge)**



When the stock market crashed in the fall of 1929, the things that marked 1920s growth contributed to a long and depressed economy in the 1930s. Mass production and consumption meant millions of people were employed in the major industries, such as steel. When the depression hit, the demand for products and thus their need for production, fell sharply. City dwellers increasingly found themselves unemployed. Farmers suffered through severe droughts, Dust Bowl storms, and restricted credit, often losing their land. Debts piled up and savings disappeared. Banks limited remaining credit, recalled loans and foreclosed on mortgages. In addition, because fewer people lived and worked directly on the land, city people could not fall back on the barter system for exchange of food and shelter. Without a cash or credit income, the economy fell to an unprecedented low.

### Responses By The Federal Government

In late 1932 over 13 million Americans, about one third of the workforce, were out of jobs. People had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and felt hungry, bewildered, apathetic, and even angry. Young people were particularly vulnerable and had little hope for the future, given that they found themselves untrained, unskilled, unable to gain work experience, and lacking adequate education. Most did not seek to understand the depression's causes; rather they focused on its effects on themselves, their families, and friends.



The stock market crash virtually eliminated the credit system, personal and family savings, and long-term capital expenditures by industry. Consumer demand was sharply reduced, devastating confidence along with much of the business structure. The final straw for many came when a large number of banks and financial institutions, having demanded loan repayments from people who had no money, went bankrupt. The almost total collapse of the nation's financial structure demolished the public confidence that existed in the 1920s.

**(left: CCC Powder Monkey Crew, Olympic National Forest, Wash. 1933. Click to enlarge.)**

President Herbert Hoover attempted to remedy the crisis but to little avail. Despite the fact that he was not directly responsible for the depression, he became a scapegoat. Re-nominated by the Republicans in 1932, the condition of the national economy soured his chances for re-election. The Democrats nominated Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), then governor of New York. FDR looked to create a federal program to intervene in the public and private sectors that would create a "new deal." He campaigned on the basic economic and social issues that were at the very heart of the depression and he prevailed in a landslide.

Roosevelt took office on March 4, 1933 and his inaugural speech helped change the country's attitude to one of careful optimism. His first official act as President was to declare a bank

holiday on March 6th to allow time for the Treasury Department to check the stability of each bank before reopening. Thus began the “Hundred Days” in which the President, with the consent of Congress, produced much of the legislation that formed the body of the New Deal.

### Creation Of The Civilian Conservation Corps

On March 21, 1933, FDR sent a message to Congress stating that he wanted to establish a new forestry relief agency: *I propose to create a Civilian Conservation Corps to be used in simple work, not interfering with normal employment, and confining itself to forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control, and similar projects. I call your attention to the fact that this type of work is of definite, practical value, not only through the prevention of great present financial loss, but also as a means of creating future national wealth.*



Congress acted quickly, passing a bill authorizing the President to act on his proposed back-to-work forestry program. On April 5, 1933, FDR signed Executive Order 6101 which officially established the Emergency Conservation Work Program. The initial selection of men for CCC camps began four days after the signing of the Executive Order, with the first camp established ten days later. This first CCC camp, near Luray, Virginia on the George Washington National Forest, was named Camp

Roosevelt. In early June, a peak of almost 14,000 men per day were selected and assigned to nearly 1,300 CCC camps across the nation. By July 1, 1933, three months into the program, the six month enrollment quota of almost 275,000 was reached. **(left: CCC Camp Dinner Time. Click to enlarge.)**

The CCC represented a significant departure from older work relief efforts that relied on private or small public efforts for those without jobs. The CCC was designed to “give each man some sense of his duties as a citizen in American Society.” It provided unemployed young men with work in the nation’s forests, parks, and rangelands. The CCC program became one of the most successful of New Deal back-to-work programs.

As Neil Maher explores in his new book, “Nature’s New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement,” the idea for the CCC originated from FDR’s experiences with Progressive Era conservation and his involvement with the Boy Scouts. The Scouts promoted the idea that social behavior could be shaped by manipulating one’s physical surroundings or environment. Like the Scouts, the CCC brought young men from what many viewed as diseased urban settings struggling through the depression and placed them in healthful environments in nature.

### CCC Program Objectives

The CCC program had two main objectives. The first was to find immediate and useful conservation work for hundreds of thousands of unemployed young men. The other, as specified in law in 1937, was to provide vocational training, and later educational training, for enrollees. Enrollment or enlistment lasted six months with an option of re-enrolling for additional six month periods for a maximum of two years. Men were paid a dollar a day, with \$25.00 per month sent home to their dependents, usually their parents. Remaining funds could be spent at the camp canteen or for other personal expenses. The government provided the enrollees with



room, board, clothing and transportation.

**(right: CCC Camp F-5, Colville National Forest, Wash. 1933. [Click to enlarge.](#))**

### Categories Of Enrollees

Four distinct categories of enrollees existed. Most numerous were the young men, or Juniors, between the ages of 18 and 25 (age limits changed to 17 and 28 in 1935). The Junior enrollee had to be single, from a family on relief and pass a physical examination. He enrolled for six months, with the option of re-enlisting for an additional six month periods if his work was satisfactory. Juniors comprised about 85 percent of CCC enrollment.

Another group was the Local Experienced Men (LEM) who served as project leaders in the Junior camps. These men were hired from local communities and were often previously employed in outdoor or woods work. They could be married and were allowed to live at home if the camp was nearby and there were no age restrictions on them.

Both the LEMs and Juniors were chosen through the U.S. Department of Labor until 1935 and thereafter by each state. LEM's comprised about five percent of total CCC enrollment.



Veterans of World War I were another group of older men who could enroll in the CCC. Several thousand World War I veterans had taken part in the "Bonus Army" marches on Washington in 1932 and 1933. The earlier march in Hoover's administration was dispersed by the U.S. Army, while the latter march was dispersed by FDR by offering to allow them to enroll in the CCC. Many second "Bonus Army" veterans opted to join the newly established work relief program with the administration creating separate CCC companies and camps for the veterans. After the initial "Bonus Army" enrollment, Veterans Administration

regional offices chose other veterans from around the country. Veterans were not restricted by age or marital status. This category comprised about five percent of total CCC enrollment. **(left: CCC Fighting Fire, Columbia National Forest, Wash.1937. [Click to enlarge.](#))**

American Indians and residents from the U.S. Territories comprised another group of CCC enrollees. They generally had separate CCC companies and camps on or in their own reservations or territories, where they could live at home and work on nearby projects. They were not restricted by age or marital status. American Indians were chosen by the local tribal council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs and made up approximately two percent of total CCC enrollment. Territorial enrollees lived in the U.S. Territories, which at the time included residents of Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These enrollees were selected by the territorial agency that requested a CCC camp for specific work projects. Camps were administered by the Departments of Agriculture or Interior. Territorial enrollees comprised about one percent of the total CCC enrollment.

### CCC Camp Organization

The basic organizational units of the CCC were the nine regional corps areas, which were the same as existing Army Corps areas. Each corps area was commanded by an Army General. After signing up for the CCC, enrollees were assigned to a CCC company and reported to an Army post for conditioning. The companies were then dispersed to a CCC camp. Later in the program, many



enrollees were sent directly to existing CCC companies and camps without the physical conditioning period. A CCC company consisted of about 200 men, although several women's camps existed in northeastern states, enrolling 8,500 women before being eliminated in 1937. In the early days of the CCC some racially integrated camps existed, but these were disbanded in 1935. By 1938 the number of African-American enrollees reached 10 percent, and by the end of the program nearly 250,000 served, almost all in segregated camps.



**(right: CCC Camp Mineral, Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, Wash. 1933. Click to enlarge.)**

At the beginning of the program, regular U.S. Army officers were in charge of each camp. Within several years the officers were replaced by Reserve officers from all military branches. As World War II approached, civilians were allowed to have command positions in CCC camps. Military officers had authority over enrollees from 5 p.m. until 8 a.m. The responsible work agency, such as the Forest Service, had authority over CCC men during the work day.

Initially, each CCC company was housed in a camp consisting of surplus army pyramid tents or wooden tent frames. Permanent camp buildings were later constructed by local community contractors, unless the camp was in an especially remote area in which case the company commander had an option of having the CCC company construct their own buildings. Later, camps were fitted with inexpensive, prefabricated and portable buildings. Camps were built around a basic model that included barracks, kitchen, mess hall, recreation hall, office, latrines, and equipment and storage sheds.



Many work projects occurred far away from the main CCC camp and required men to spend as much as half the work day in travel. As a result, CCC Director Robert Fechner allowed the widespread use of "side" or "spike" camps near the work site. Side camps usually consisted of 10-20 men living in tents, with a work supervisor or foreman in charge. CCC boys often preferred these side camps, which offered less stringent schedules and a more congenial work and play atmosphere. **(left: New CCC Recruits in NYC 10-3-1934. Click to enlarge.)**

In addition to improving the nation's forest and park lands, CCC enrollees bettered themselves. On-the-job training provided CCC crew members with many marketable skills. Another important method was providing CCC members a basic education. About one-half of the enrollees had less than an eighth-grade education and a number of them were functionally illiterate. Evening instruction offered remedial reading and writing skills. The CCC educational program also offered general education topics as well as specialized vocational classes. Many camps worked closely with local schools while some colleges offered correspondence courses.

CCC enrollees received medical and dental care along with opportunities for religious services and recreational activities. Religious services were usually provided at least once a month, although many enrollees attended local churches. Recreation often involved organized and competitive sports through camp programs. Most camps provided space for library services, dances, ping pong, card games and musical outlets. Additional opportunities such as hunting, fishing, and courting young women in the local community existed for the CCC boys in their free time.

## CCC Accomplishments In The National Forests



The CCC made substantial contributions to forested areas, especially the millions of acres of national forests. Initially, most CCC camps were assigned to national and state forests, public domain land, and a few private forests. Later in the program, additional camps were organized for other state and federal agencies that requested specific work projects. CCC accomplishments in reforestation, road construction, firefighting and recreation still yield benefits today. The CCC left the nation a vastly improved natural resources balance sheet, including three billion trees planted, 125,000 miles of truck trails built, 89,000 miles of

telephone lines, 800 new state parks developed, 40 million acres of farm lands benefiting from erosion control work, rehabilitation of drainage ditches, better grazing conditions on the public domain, and an increasing wildlife population. **(left: CCC Road Construction, Columbia National Forest, Wash. 1933. Click to enlarge.)**

During the dark days of the Depression, the CCC put over three million men to work on conservation projects in the national forests. A 1933 Journal of Forestry article reported on the work of CCC enrollees in eastern National Forests, "On the whole, the men in the camps have taken to the woods work very well. Many prefer it to work on roads or other construction projects. The use of an ax is no longer a mystery, and trees are often called by their first names," the article proclaimed. Many of these workers in the woods later found themselves using different sorts of tools as they served their country in World War II.

### Conclusion

The CCC was one of the most popular and successful New Deal programs. It enjoyed overwhelming support from the enrollees, local communities, various states and territories, and the nation. Perhaps the most significant product of the CCC-era was the profound and lasting effect it had on the three million enrollees. Work in the CCC provided a turning point in the lives of many of the nation's youth and it brought much needed financial aid to their families. In addition, it fostered self-confidence, a desire and capacity to return to active work, a new understanding of a great country, and a faith in its future.

Read more details on CCC projects [by clicking here >](#)

### **Additional Resources and Selected Bibliography**

[African Americans in the Civilian Conservation Corps](#) explores the issues confronting African American enrollees in the CCC and additional information and interviews exist exploring African American experiences at [Camp Pomona](#) on the Shawnee National Forest.

[Forest Improvements by the CCC](#) explores how CCC work aided the protection, administration and use of the national forests. Foresters estimated that the CCC advanced forest protection by 20-40 years in its first five years.

[Forests Protected by the CCC](#) examines CCC efforts regarding forest fire, insects, and disease. The creation of the CCC allowed provided for 24 hour fire control operations for the first time.

[Recreational Developments by the CCC in National and State Forests](#) explains how almost all CCC work has recreational value in helping provide access as well as habitat for fish and

game.

[Reforestation by the CCC](#) discusses the 22 nurseries manned by CCC labor, as well as thinning operations and cooperative work with small timberland owners. The pamphlet connects the restoration and improvement of forests to the restoration and improvement of self-respect and morale among the CCC boys.

For broad overviews of the CCC, peruse [The CCC At Work: A Story of 2,500,000 Young Men](#) and ["We Can Take it": A Short Story of the C.C.C.](#)

[Woodsmanship for the CCC](#), published in 1937, suggested that solid woodsmanship involved care with fire, proper sanitation, acceptance of fish and game laws, and careful observation, reinforcing the CCC mottos of "Safety First" and "Better Safe Than Sorry."

And for some fun, play [The Forest Ranger Game](#) in Connection with CCC Camps.

### CCC Legacy

#### CCC Alumni

R.M. Evans, "Civilian Conservation Corps Improves Stands on Eastern National Forests," *Journal of Forestry* 31 (November 1933): 771-777.

Neil Maher, ["A New Deal Body Politic: Landscape, Labor, and the Civilian Conservation Corps."](#) *Environmental History* (July 2002): 435-462.

Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Alison T. Otis, et. al., *The Forest Service and the Civilian Conservation Corps: 1933-42, FS-395*. Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service, August 1986.

John C. Paige, [The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Park Service, 1933-1942: An Administrative History](#). National Park Service, Department of Interior, 1985.

Sarah Phillips, *This Land, This Nation: Conservation, Rural America, and the New Deal*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967.

Joseph M. Speakman, ["Into the Woods: The First Year of the Civilian Conservation Corps,"](#) *Prologue* 38 (Fall 2006).

---

To contribute to "Looking Back," e-mail your material to: [aaronshapiro@fs.fed.us](mailto:aaronshapiro@fs.fed.us)

[Home](#) | [Past Issues](#) | [Contacts](#) | [Writer's Guidelines](#)