



Part 5 of the Historical Snapshots Installments

The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Hoosier National Forest – Part I

Though the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) evolved from despair and a nation desperately in need of help, it became a program that today represents the very best of a dark period in our history. Across our nation, the work of the CCC is still enjoyed by millions of people, and many programs since have tried to copy the success of putting people to work to generate public benefits.

President Franklin Roosevelt created the Emergency Work Act in 1933 in his first Hundred Days in office. One of the programs which came out of this Act was the CCC – a program to recruit young men to work in forests and parks, and improve our nation’s natural resources. The young men, called enrollees, were required to send \$25 of their \$30 monthly wage back home to help their families. Immediately the results of this rippled across the country’s economy as 275,000 enrollees in 1,300 camps sent money home. Many families were able to stay off relief rolls because of the money they received from a CCC enrollee. Living on \$5 a month wasn’t difficult for the boys, said George DeMuth, 97, a former Forest Service employee who once worked with the CCC camps. The camp provided most of their needs, and you could buy three bottles of beer for a quarter at the local store.

“The two greatest things that ever happened in our country,” said DeMuth, “were the Depression and Roosevelt.” Roosevelt took unemployed men and put them to work on resource projects throughout the country. DeMuth says the nation, “had to do something. You can’t imagine the devastation of this country then.” He remembered there being gullies everywhere and remarked that the only topsoil in southern Indiana was in the Ohio River.



Two enrollees from the Kurtz Camp 1594 in front of their headquarters building.

The young men themselves were forever changed. They learned teamwork, and 40,000 of them learned to read and write. By the time the program was disbanded in 1942, nearly 3 million men had worked in the program. In Indiana 63,742 men were employed by the CCC during its tenure. After 1940 the numbers of men diminished as they were sent to war and soon funding was cut and the camps closed. The skills they had learned in the CCC, using heavy equipment and working well with others, served the men well in the armed forces or later in civilian life.

Most camps were made up of men, 18-25 years old. The camps were the dual responsibility of the Company Commander (Army officers) who administered the camp and the Work Project Superintendent who lined up and oversaw the work the enrollees did each day.

Five CCC camps were allocated to the Hoosier Purchase Units and established to perform work on national forest lands. Some camps were short term and some persisted for several years. Records on the camps are sketchy. One camp was reportedly located near Shoals but no further information has been found.



CCC enrollees by a truck, their usual mode of transportation to worksites, at the Kurtz Camp.

The other camps which operated on Forest Service lands were located near Kurtz, Bryantsville, English, Tell City, and Sulphur.

This 2-part column describes the Forest Service camps. The Kurtz camp will be discussed in this column and the remaining camps will be covered in the next issue.



Kurtz Camp Buildings in March 1937.

Kurtz Camp 1594

Camp 1594, known locally as “Camp Little America” was established on September 12, 1935. It was located ¼ mile NE of the Kurtz railroad stop.

Foundations of buildings are all that remain. Paul McWilliams, an early Forest Service employee remembers most of the boys at the Kurtz camp were from the coal-mining areas of Kentucky or Tennessee, he said a lot of them were of Polish descent, though they did have a few local boys as well. McWilliams said some of the boys “were really pitiful... but it wasn’t very long before they began to shape up.” He explained they were thin and looked starved. He said they also couldn’t count. If they made a purchase with a quarter in the commissary they didn’t know if they should get change back or not.

Most of the work done by this camp on the Hoosier was construction work. DeMuth,

who also worked out of this camp, said CCC crews built the Hickory Ridge Fire Tower, the Trinity Springs Fire Tower, and put in many miles of poles and telephone lines between the tower, the town of Houston, Bedford, and Kurtz. They also built the tower at Houston and helped man many of the towers during high fire danger. The crews also did road construction and built many of the roads in the areas including the Tower Road, Dutch Ridge Road, and Maumee Road. The rock was quarried near Blackwell Pond.

DeMuth said the most important thing the CCC did was to re-vegetate the abandoned farms as they were acquired by the Forest Service. He reflects that it is probably difficult for people today to understand how people could have let the land get in such bad condition, “But people just didn’t know what they were doing to the land. They just didn’t know.”



Camp 1594, or "Camp Little America" in October 1940 near Kurtz, Indiana.



CCC enrollee at Kurtz Camp with the camp automobiles. March 26, 1937

The land acquired by the Forest Service was generally the steepest and the most eroded. "You could see bedrock on almost every hill," he says. DeMuth says the Forest planted locust on some of the severest sites, but the rest was put in shortleaf pine. At that time shortleaf pine was the only readily available seedling.

DeMuth said they planted a lot of trees in the Allens Creek area, which is now underwater in Monroe Reservoir. Another project the Kurtz CCC camp worked on that is now gone was the Martin Recreation Site. The Forest Service built the 2-acre Martin Lake off Henderson Creek, with a bathhouse, swimming pool, and a shelter house. Unfortunately the lake kept filling in with mud, so was eventually abandoned. He also supervised the CCC crews in constructing the Forest Service Ranger Station in Brownstown.

Rose Wray, whose family lived just west of the Kurtz CCC camp, remembers the camp well though she was just a girl at the time. Her father, David Whittredge, had hogs and went daily to the camp to pick up refuge to feed their hogs. She said after the hogs finished there would be bowls, silverware, and tin pie plates left behind. In the early days they faithfully returned everything they salvaged from the hogs but later were told to just keep what they found. Wray said as a child she can't remember eating soup out of anything except CCC camp bowls.

Wray also remembers the young men walking over to their farm after work or on week-ends to watch them milk cows or train horses. Sometimes they'd even pitch in and help throw bales of hay up into the loft. Her dad also often took many of the boys to their church on Sunday.

The camp was closed on May 12, 1942. At that time the camp numbers had dwindled from 200 to 57. The last enrollees were transferred to Valparaiso to work on a National defense project. After the camp was closed a caretaker stayed on at the site for some time.

Information from Paul McWilliams was taken from an interview done in 1977 by Indiana University's Center for the Study of History and Memory.