

CHAPTER I - THE CIVILIAN
CONSERVATION CORPS PROGRAM

On March 9, 1933, the newly elected President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, called to the White House six High Government officials and laid before them a plan for the information of a Civilian Conservation Corps. From 4 P.M. to 10 P.M., with time out for dinner, the conferees listened, spoke, debated. Mostly, they listened. "They" were, in addition to the President, the Secretary of War, Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of the Interior, the Director of the Bureau of the Budget, the Judge Advocate General of the Army, and the Solicitor of the Department of the Interior. They listened for two hours as the President outlined his plan. He talked of natural resources and men and the dependence of the future on the two. His was a dual reclamation scheme on a Gargantuan scale, reclamation of wasting natural resources and reclamation of young American manhood.

It was the President's idea that perhaps a half million idle young men could be placed at work in the forests, on farms and along the streams wherever natural resources needed help. The men would be picked from cities, towns and farms and transported into these resource areas. There they would live and work in a great chain of wholesome outdoor work camps, planting trees, reducing fire hazards, developing fire prevention and suppression, physical improvements, such as fire towers, trails and lines of communication, clearing streams and checking soil waste through erosion.

The Secretary of War had been asked to appear because his Department was to establish and supply the camps, enroll the men, feed and pay them and otherwise look after their welfare. The Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture had been asked because they were to select the work projects and supervise the work which the young men were to do. The project would cost money--that accounted for the presence of the Budget Director. There were legal aspects to be considered and this meant that the presence of the Solicitor of the Department of Justice and the Judge Advocate General of the Army was essential.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the President asked the Secretary of War if the plan for a national CCC, as he had outlined it, could be put into effect at once. The answer was "yes." Then the President turned to the two Cabinet members whose departments were charged with the administration of natural resources wealth. "How quickly," he inquired, "can the Departments of Interior and Agriculture arrange work projects in forests and parks and put young men to work." The President was assured that the work projects would be ready when the camps had been established and the young men enrolled.

Satisfied that his program could be made effective promptly, the President asked the Judge Advocate General to put the CCC idea into legal form and have it ready at 9 o'clock that evening. Then the conference recessed.

That first official CCC meeting had moved rapidly because the President had been thinking and planning about this project for months. He, as a matter of fact, had been concerned about conservation for many years. Even as a boy on the family Hyde Park estate, the President had shown interest in conservation. This interest had grown with the years, strengthened and clarified by an address given by Gifford Pinchot, at Roosevelt's request, before the New York State Assembly while the young man from Hyde Park was a member. Later as Governor of New York State, the future President had done much to develop a first rate reforestation program for the Commonwealth. During the President's last year as Governor, 10,000 persons from community unemployed lists were employed on tree planting and other reforestation projects.

The plan to provide work and training for unemployed young men on a national basis through the inauguration of a broadscale reforestation program was first enunciated publicly by the President in his address at Chicago in June 1932 when he accepted the Democratic Presidential nomination.

"We know," said Mr. Roosevelt, "that a very hopeful and immediate means of relief both for the unemployed and for agriculture will come from a wider plan for the converting of many millions of acres of marginal and unused lands into timberland through reforestation. There are tens of millions of acres east of the Mississippi River alone in abandoned farms or cutover land now growing up in worthless brush. Why, every European nation has a definite land policy.--We have none,--we face a future of soil erosion and timber famine. It is clear that economic foresight and immediate employment march hand in hand, in the call for the reforestation of these vast areas.

"In so doing, employment can be given to a million men."

As the months passed after his nomination, the Candidate further developed his reforestation-unemployment relief idea in speeches and in discussions with his advisers. In September 1932, he wrote a letter to a Pacific coast editor outlining his plan for using unemployed men in the cause of national conservation. Immediately after the election the Department of Agriculture began explorations to see how many men could be employed usefully on natural resource projects. Similar studies were made by the Department of the Interior. The War Department also studied the question.

In his Inaugural address President Roosevelt indicated he would move quickly to establish a CCC.

"Our greatest primary task is to put people to work," he said. "This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. It can be accomplished in part by direct recruiting by the Government itself, treating the task as we would treat the emergency of war, but at the same time, through this employment, accomplishing greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our natural resources."

There is no doubt but that the Nation was confronted by a tremendous conservation task on that Spring night when the President made his first official move to put his new reforestation program into action. Forests had been cruelly abused and neglected for generations. Although the Country's future depended on its natural resource wealth, forests and soils had been used and squandered with little thought to the needs of generations still to come.

By 1933, heedlessness and waste in the handling of natural resources had taken a terrific toll. The original 820,000 acres of virgin timber on the Nation's natural resource balance sheet had dwindled to 132,000,000 acres of virgin forests, mostly in the west, and some 500,000,000 acres of second growth, farm woodlots and sub-marginal lands.

The Bureau of Chemistry and Soils of the Department of Agriculture had reported in 1929 that a minimum of a billion and one-half tons of soil material annually was washed out of the fields and pastures of the landscape, costing farmers an annual loss of \$200,000,000 through wastage of plant food. It was estimated that 125 million acres of farm land had been severely damaged by erosion.

Critical as was the natural resource problem, the Nation had a more serious one in its youth population. Youth coming to manhood in the Thirties was threatened by a Terrific economic blight. There were some five million young men between the ages of 18 and 25 who clamored for work when there was no work, or who clamored for the right to stay in school when there was no money to keep them there. Some had had jobs but lost them when their employers failed or reduced their working staffs. Few of these youngsters had ever held a regular job. They were ready victims for the moral dry rot that accompanies

enforced idleness and its resulting dejection. Insidiously, there was spreading abroad in the land the **nucleus** of those bands of young depredators who infested the Russian countryside after the Revolution and who became known as "wild boys."

It was with this background of dejected youth and a bleak natural resource outlook, unless immediate remedial steps were taken, that the six Government officials returned to the White House at 9 o'clock that evening. In the interim each official had talked with his advisers and reviewed again the steps necessary to put the President's plan into execution.

The draft of the new legislation asked by the Chief Executive was placed on the President's desk. After a brief discussion in which the President urged speed upon the part of the Departments and Agencies connected with the proposed program, the officials left.

CCC LEGISLATION INTRODUCED

At 10 o'clock P.M. the President received a group of Congressional leaders. Agreement was reached to act immediately on the proposal to establish a Civilian Conservation Corps. On March 21st there was read in both Houses of Congress, a message from the President on the CCC program.

"I propose," the President said, "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."

The President called attention to the practical value of such work asserting it would create future national wealth and present great personal financial gains.

"More important, however, than the material gains," the President added, "will be the moral and spiritual value of such work. The overwhelming majority of unemployed Americans, who are now walking the streets and receiving private or public relief, would infinitely prefer to work. We can take a vast army of these unemployed out into healthful surroundings. We can eliminate to some extent at least the threat that enforced idleness brings to spiritual and moral stability. It is not a panacea for all the unemployment, but it is an essential step in this emergency."

