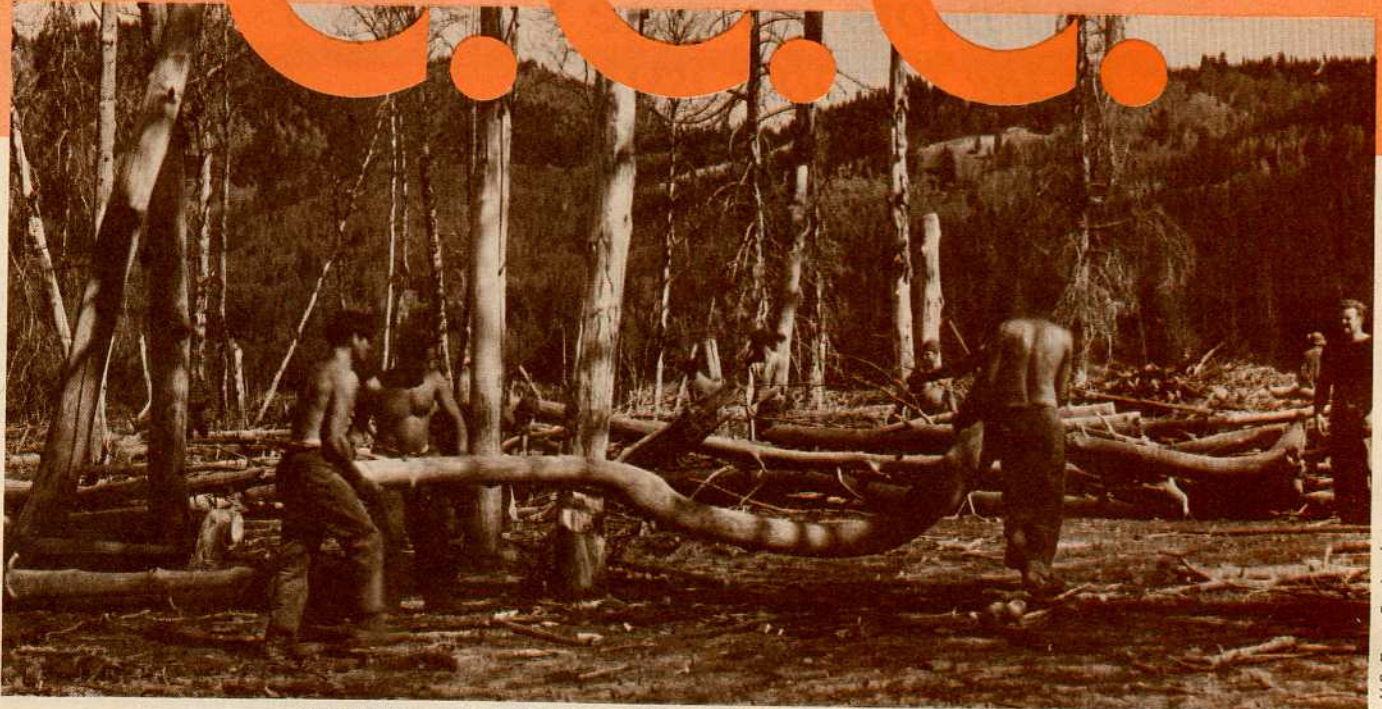


THEY HELPED BUILD A BETTER AMERICA...



U.S. Forest Service photo.

Near Jackson Lake in the Teton National Forest, C.C.C. workers clear dead timber.

by Robert J. Duhse

The year was 1933. The great depression had paralyzed America. Two million homeless citizens were roaming the land searching for non-existent jobs, among them a quarter-million teenage hobos. Millions more young Americans were idle and juvenile crime rates were rising. Extended droughts across the western states added to the misery as crops and fields blew away in dust storms. The ecology of the nation was being destroyed while jobless men watched helplessly, their future vanishing before their eyes.

Into this frightening chaos stepped a strong new President. Franklin Roosevelt had always been a dedicated environmentalist, and he was keenly aware of the hopeless apathy of young Americans. He quickly sketched out a plan to combine forest and soil conservation with the employment of hundreds of thousands of idle youths. On March 31, 1933 the new project, to be designated as the Civilian Conservation Corps, was created.

The goals of the new organization were tremendous. Reforestation and soil erosion control were drastic necessities. From an estimated one billion acres of virgin forest only 100 million acres remained, the rest recklessly squandered. Several seasons of drought and windstorms had caused billions of tons of irreplaceable top soil to be eroded and blown away from these cut-over lands. Controlling and reversing these huge losses to the ecology was to be the primary work assigned to the new Corps.

After an uncertain beginning it became apparent that only the Army's organizational capabilities could build and equip the needed camps, examine, outfit and provide orientation training for the enrollees.

Service in the Corps was of course voluntary and by personal application, and it was clearly understood that the new organization was to have no military training or involvement. Under this plan the Army ran the camps with regular or reserve officers. However, the Corps was under the immediate direction of a civilian, Robert Fechner, who reported to the Department of Labor. All assigned work was performed under his authority, and he correlated all projects

with the various Federal agencies desiring services of the Corps.

During the actual work day the engineers, foresters, or other specialists of each cooperating agency were responsible for assigning work projects and supervising of the crews. After working hours the men were under the authority of the Army officer in charge of their camp. This plan worked reasonably well through the entire 9 years of the Corps, and provided jobs for thousands of unemployed reserve officers.

President Roosevelt had demanded that 250,000 youths and 25,000 war veterans must be enrolled and in their camps by July 1st, 1933. This tremendous task required that thousands of enrollees must be selected, processed, and equipped each day, with 20 camps to be established daily, to meet this 90-day deadline. To everyone's surprise, this goal was reached, for by July 1st a total of 274,375 enrollees were in camps. By December 31 over 1500 camps were in full operation. The first camp, in Virginia, was named, quite appropriately, 'Camp Roosevelt.'

Although there were variations in the plan from year to year, basic requirements for applicants required

The Saga of The Civilian Conservation Corps

them to be between 17 and 23½ years old, American citizens, unmarried males, unemployed and not in school. They must be in good physical condition and from needy families. Enrollment terms averaged 6 months. There was to be no race discrimination. They were paid \$30 a month, but \$22 to \$25 per month was deducted from this sum and sent directly to their families. In addition, a percentage of the enrollees were selected as group leaders and paid \$45 per month, with an additional number as assistant leaders at \$36.

These low wage scales at first

foot barracks, with a mess hall, school building, officer's quarters and service buildings. Most of the men took pride in their camps and built rustic fences, fish ponds, swimming pools, gardens, recreational buildings and facilities for all types of outdoor sports.

A typical work day began with reveille at 6 AM. 15 minutes of calisthenics followed, with breakfast at 6:45. The food was plain but plentiful; for breakfast it would be prunes, cereal, eggs and ham, bread, coffee and milk. After breakfast the men made their beds and policed the



C.C.C. worker plants a pine seedling.

U.S. Forest Service photo.

Today, half a century later, Americans still benefit from the labors of the Civilian Conservation Corps

caused alarm from some labor groups and organizations, who feared these wage scales would become a national minimum standard and affect union jobs. These fears were soon proved to be groundless. It was necessary to hire many thousands of unemployed civilians at normal pay to train and direct the men, including engineers, foresters, soil specialists, teachers, doctors, dentists, and clergymen. Some 40 thousand such specialists were required for these jobs.

The first step to becoming a member of the Corps was an application to a state welfare office, where the applicants were selected on a state-quota basis with family welfare status as the primary guide. Upon selection the enrollee was sent to a nearby Army camp where he was given physical and psychological exams and a brief indoctrination course. If he passed these tests he was given work and dress uniforms and assigned to a camp, if possible, near his home.

In the first years of the Corps many enrollees probably had to live in tent camps. By 1936 new pre-fab barracks capable of being relocated were in use. The average camp consisted of 200 enrollees living in four 20x100

camp until work call at 7:45. The crews were then taken to their work assignments. Lunch break was from noon to 1 PM with the food usually brought to the work site. Work resumed until 4 PM. The work week was Monday through Friday, eight hours daily but including lunch and travel time. All the national holidays were observed.

After 4 PM the men cleaned up and

donned their dress uniforms, which they were required to wear at 5 PM inspection and also at dinner. At first these uniforms were Army surplus drab but by 1938 Roosevelt insisted they be given distinctive bright green uniforms designed for the Corps. After dinner their time was their own until curfew at 11 PM, for sports, trips to town, or classes.

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Surveying for a new road in Snoqualmie National Forest.

U.S. Forest Service photo.

The C.C.C.

millions of dollars spent by the Federal government in these areas often meant the difference between depression and prosperity for any nearby community, especially in the deep South and the western drought areas. To illustrate the benefits from these expenditures in a state, consider the 1937/38 annual report from Florida for Corps operations in that state. \$5 million in salaries and subsistence was dispensed that year, including enrollees' income returned to their needy families. Florida's total expenditure was only \$19,000. In addition, the projects contributed vast economic gains in reforestation, parks, drainage and reclamation which are of continuing inestimable value.

It would require too much space to catalogue all of the valuable projects completed by the Corps during its existence. The Department of Agriculture used the bulk of the work force under the supervision of its professional specialists, assisted by many thousands of local experienced men. More than half of those were employed in national, state and private forests, under the Forest Service. The rest were assigned to other agencies. It was the most successful example of real government cooperation between six federal departments or agencies in our history. The following is only a fractional listing of their activities.

The Forest Services the Corps seeded and planted billions of trees on cut-over lands or in new or established national, state, and private forests. For example, in the 9 North Central states area alone, 8 billion trees were planted on 800,000 acres of land left bare by timber-hungry pioneers. The Corps stopped soil erosion, cut thousands of miles of fire-breaks, fought forest fires, built fire towers, made truck roads and trails, cleared thousands of acres of downed timber, built campgrounds and dams, regrassed barren land, and hundreds of other projects.

To save America's valuable white pine timber from the killing blister-rust they inspected and removed the host pest from 5 million acres of this type of tree. They removed 275,000 elms infected with the deadly Dutch Elm disease. They examined 3½ million acres of trees and removed 15

million egg clusters of the Gypsy Moth plague. To help control these and other diseases they dug 12 million feet of drainage ditches in Delaware alone.

The Soil Conservation Service employed over 1½ million enrollees working in 500 camps during the 9 years. Each camp worked 25,000 acres of land. They established erosion control on more than 20 million acres of land that was being lost to erosion by wind and water. They taught farmers contour planting and tree farming, fence construction, slope terracing and proper drainage. On this restored land the Corps planted hundreds of millions of trees and saved countless billions of tons of fertile topsoil from future loss.

The nation's wildlife was being decimated with little legal restraint. The President's Wildlife Commission in 1934 devised a restoration program assigned to the Corps. Submarginal land was set aside as wildlife refuges. Fish-rearing ponds were built and lakes and streams were restocked with fish. Springs were opened for wildlife use, waterfowl refuge areas were developed and planted with foods. In only 4 years the wildlife situation had improved immensely.

National and state parks also reaped huge benefits from the work of the Corps. Hundreds of new parks and recreation areas were developed entirely through their labor. Roads, trails, dams, lakes, picnic areas, fireplaces, swimming pools, bridges, recreational buildings, campgrounds, and all the other improvements enjoyed by Americans today, were the result of their activities. Historic sites, monuments, old forts and buildings were restored by the Corps.

Other valuable projects included flood control projects in many states, involving ditching, drainage, and the construction of dams, some over 1000 feet long and 70 feet high. Subterranean coals fires in eastern and western states threatened valuable resources and these, too, were fought to a standstill by the men assigned to those areas.

The Grazing Service in the 10 western states included 142,000,000 acres on which more than 11 million head of livestock depended for food. The loss of these animals could have spelled disaster for ranchers and food shortages throughout America. Drought and erosion had taken their deadly toll. The Corps quickly drilled

wells, built water reservoirs, opened springs, made truck roads and corals, controlled rodents and weeds, and re-vegetated large areas with grass.

To assist federal plant services the Corps built greenhouses, horticultural field stations, pipe lines, irrigation ditches, planted seeds and shrubs, and assisted in improving the quality and quantity of fruits and other crops for the benefit of farmers and planters.

In Puerto Rico reforestation was badly required. The Corps employed 2100 natives for this and other work, in 12 camps. They planted millions of seedlings, including mahogany, teak, eucalyptus, and mesquite, established tree nurseries, and stocked streams with fish. The money spent in that area was vitally needed by the local economy.

To perform all these projects desired by the 6 participating agencies, the enrollees were offered training in one or more of 50 job skills. They became proficient operators of power shovels, stone crushers, graders, heavy trucks, and other heavy machines. Upon successful

completion of their training each man received a certificate of proficiency which proved his skill to a civilian employer. Over 60 thousand were thus trained, and these special skills were to prove an indispensable pool of badly-needed manpower when the nation was plunged into war with Japan.

The Corps had always been popular with more than 80% of the American public. Many groups had tried to make it a permanent training and fitness organization for America's youth.

Several factors led to the demise of the C.C.C. Its forceful Director Robert Fechner, died suddenly in 1939, and the ensuing struggle for control lowered the morale and enthusiasm for the Corps and its supporters. Also, the Army was becoming deeply involved in the worsening European war news and wanted to be relieved of the responsibility for the organization.

On December 17, 1941, soon after Pearl Harbor, the role of the Corps was radically changed from civilian to war and defense projects. Military

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