

RETURN OF THE SOIL SOLDIERS

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It's a cold November morning in the Tonto National Forest, but the men and women on the Babe Haight Trail have already shed their jackets and are down to T-shirts. They're not hiking; they're working like dogs.

Saul Palomo is hand drilling half-inch holes in logs laid across the trail. A few

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steps behind, Donna Eckman is pounding rebar into the holes to "nail" the logs to the ground. Up ahead, Cindy Boehme is raking rocks. Every quarter hour or so, they swap jobs to spread the punishment around to different muscles.

"Sometimes I wonder why I'm doing this for \$4.25 an hour," says a sweat-soaked George Campbell. "But when that paycheck comes, it's okay, man. I want to go to music school. I want to make money like Eddie Van Halen."

These are members of the Arizona Conservation Corps, a young little-known state agency that recalls Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. It employs workers 18 to 25 years old at minimum wage for a year, mostly in outdoor jobs in Arizona's national forests and state parks. (Currently there are crews working in Yuma, Flagstaff, and Globe, as well as Payson, Phoenix, and Tucson.)

ACC members build and rebuild hiking

trails, bridges, parking lots, and fences. They also plant trees and occasionally work in local social-service programs such as food banks. There's education involved, too. Corps members are paid for attending classes — forest-fire fighting, for example — and those who didn't finish high school must get a general equivalency diploma during the year.

"A lot of the corps members choose not to complete the full year— about 50 percent," says Frank W. Soltys, Jr., the corps' executive director. "Mostly it's because they've found other opportunities, which we encourage. But some leave because they're surprised at the difficulty of the work."

"If they can go through a year in the ACC with all the demands we place on them, they can do anything after that. And we're committed to not just shaking hands with them after that year and saying, 'see you around,' but giving them the



