

RETURN OF THE SOIL SOLDIERS

TEXT BY LAWRENCE W. CHEEK ✕ PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD MAACK



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

'IF THEY CAN GO THROUGH A YEAR IN THE ARIZONA CONSERVATION CORPS WITH ALL THE DEMANDS WE PLACE ON THEM, THEY CAN DO ANYTHING AFTER THAT'

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



skills to get a good job or the incentive to continue in school."

The ACC, founded in 1988, is a microbe among state agencies. It receives just \$275,000 in appropriations but multiplies that to around \$1 million through partnerships with the Forest Service and others. So far it provides only 60 jobs at a time plus a part-time program employing 90, but Soltys expects continued growth. It's a program that accomplishes a great deal, he says — both for the people in it and for the environment.

With Arizona's relatively low unemployment rate, there are always fast-food and convenience-mart jobs for unskilled workers (except, notably, on the Indian reservations). But with most such jobs there are few lessons and no satisfaction from completing a linear task, a big project executed from start to finish. And, as Soltys adds, "It's doing all of us a big favor by giving these kids a working knowledge of the environment — that's relatively rare these days."

Indeed, the project on the Babe Haight Trail offers working knowledge along with the hard work. The trail winds 4.5 miles from State Route 260 to the top of the Mogollon Rim, 1,420 feet above. It's a spectacular hike — or it was until the 1990 Dude Fire ravaged 37 square miles of the surrounding forest.

With erosion booming because of the devastated forest undergrowth, the trail has to be rebuilt with protective weirs to shunt water away. Without them, it would soon become a ditch. It's the corps members who explain this, not the Forest Service.

They also learn — firsthand — about the disastrous effects of the fire. For weeks they'll work in a world of stark black vertical staffs, once great ponderosa pines, poking into the sky. They'll see the grasses returning but realize that the forest will take three or four human lifespans to get back to the way it was.

They'll learn something about the work ethic, compassion, networking, and God knows what else from their leader, Vern Stearns. He's a 41-year-old disabled Vietnam vet who calls himself, depending

on when you ask, "motivator" or "mother hen" to the corps members.

He's good at reading personalities, knowing when a corps member needs only a pat on the back or some probing to find the underlying cause of a bad attitude. He's lived around Payson and Show Low for 10 years, and he plays connections on his team's behalf like a Capitol lobbyist.

There was the time, for instance, when one of the boys got in a little trouble, didn't pay a traffic ticket, and the municipal judge was about to lay 10 days on him.

"I called the judge," says Stearns, "and suggested he sentence the boy to 40 days perfect attendance in the ACC. The judge was an old fishing partner of mine. He agreed, and it worked."

In return, the Payson corps members have become a bit motherly toward Stearns. At the start of the year, he figures he was doing 35 percent of the trail work himself — the corps members just didn't have the skills at the outset. Now, if the young workers see him swinging a Pulaski — a railroad pick — they'll amble over and say, "We don't want you doing that, Vern." Stearns, who has a degenerative joint disease in his shoulder, loves it when they try to protect him. He doesn't mind the labor, but he knows the social skills implied by their concerns will mean something in next year's real-world job.

In a day, the team manages to reconstruct maybe a quarter mile of the Haight trail. It's tough work — though the setting isn't nearly as hostile as that braved by other corps members who worked on Saguaro National Monument trails in 110° F. Tucson summer heat a few months



earlier. Ask members of the Payson crew how they feel at the end of the day, and you understand what the corps is all about. Matt Laird: "Tired. Dirty." Saul Palomo: "This is the best job I've ever had." ■

Author's Note: Contributions to the Arizona Conservation Corps Fund are tax-deductible. Also, individuals and corporations may sponsor ACC projects. Interested parties should contact the corps at 800 W. Washington St., Suite 304, Phoenix, AZ 85007; (602) 542-9222.

Lawrence W. Cheek likes pounding mountain trails but not pounding rebar into them.

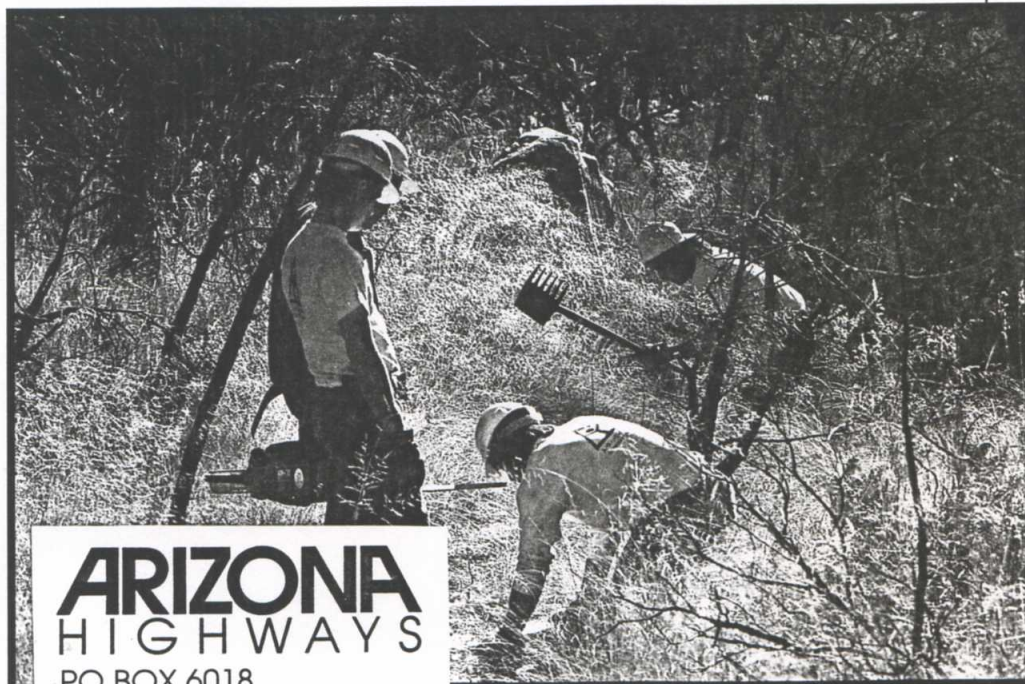
Though Richard Maack is very familiar with the area the Payson corps members worked in, this was the first time he'd seen it since the Dude Fire.

(OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE) *The crew takes a break on the Babe Haight Trail. Back row from left: Clyde Campbell, Vern Stearns, Matt Laird, George Campbell, Cindy Boehme. Front row: an unidentified corps member, Saul Palomo, Richard Anglemayer, and Donna Eckman.*

(OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW) *George Campbell, left, and Anglemayer fell a dead tree.*

(ABOVE) *Palomo drills into a log that will be used to help control erosion.*

(RIGHT) *Clearing debris from the trail are, from left, Anglemayer, George Campbell, Palomo, and Clyde Campbell.*



**ARIZONA
HIGHWAYS**

PO BOX 6018
PHOENIX AZ 85005-9916