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WITH A
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**The New York State Conservation Corps Revives
the Legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps.**

By: Brian Burns, Karen Trush and Ann Harrison-Kravis



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Corps members put finishing touches on a handicapped-accessible fishing platform in Allegany State Park.

A 1930s Model with a 1990s Twist

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Take a drive anywhere in New York State and you will see the fruits of their labors: scenic highways along the Hudson River, reforested hillsides overlooking fertile valleys in Cortland County, and great state park systems with names like Allegany, Green Lakes and Clarence Fahnestock. The impact of the hard work of millions of young men in the Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps is well known. Now these same men looking back upon 50 years of experience are witnessing the generation who must deal with the ecological crisis of the mid 21st century.

"There was nothing. No food, no work, nothing. I have seen tough times and I hope you

never see them," Leo Downey, a veteran of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, told a gathering of New York State Conservation Corps members. "We did something for the environment in the Civilian Conservation Corps...it was constructive."

Mr. Downey spoke to the heirs of the Civilian Conservation Corps legacy at the 1990 convention of the New York State Conservation Corps held at Letchworth State Park last August. Present-day corps members had come from all over New York State to participate in work projects, meet youngsters from other areas and be honored with veterans of the Civilian Conservation Corps as part of Governor Cuomo's Declaration of August 22 as Conservation Corps Day in New York State.

At the convention, 17-year-old Kulbinder Hoonjan, a resident of Monroe County, described his

experience with the New York State Conservation Corps this way, "It does not pay very much but what you get in return is far greater than what you get paid."

The Civilian Conservation Corps is the model upon which the New York State Conservation Corps is based. To the Civilian Conservation Corps basic idea of young men improving the environment, the framers of the New York legislation added insights gained from the Earth Day movement of the 1970s, the federal conservation corps programs, and the long-standing youth service corps operated by other states and various counties and municipalities within New York State. The first contingent of young men and women began work in the New York State Conservation Corps during the

(Facing page) Tired, more than a little dirty, but smiling, this worker embodies the spirit of the new NYS Conservation Corps.

summer of 1988.

Like the young men of "Roosevelt's Tree Army," today's corps members work hard for low wages. They work in teams under qualified adult supervision, completing conservation projects that have lasting benefits to their local communities. There are clear standards of behavior, and teamwork is the focus of each crew.

But there is a new twist on the 1930s model: both young men *and* women now join the corps, and corps members from *all* ethnic, social, economic and cultural backgrounds work together in today's corps. The New York State Conservation Corps, administered by New York State Parks, is a summer program employing 14- to 18-year-olds in non-residential settings. In addition to the conservation projects, corps members also participate in courses on first aid, safety, environmental education and basic employment skills development.

Besides the obvious benefits of completing work projects which conserve and develop natural, recreational and historic resources, the New York State Conservation Corps seeks to enhance the life experiences of young people. Through the completion of conservation projects, corps members develop a strong commitment to our natural world and a sense of stewardship for the planet. This spirit of responsibility will produce citizens with the resolve to participate in solving the population and ecological problems that are expected to reach a critical stage by 2050.

The New York State Conservation Corps also provides for the conservation and development of an often misused and misunderstood resource, teenagers themselves. Each corps member is



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Veterans of the old CCC meet to dedicate a plaque at Green Lake State Park.



A. Harrison-Kranis

Corps members display great esprit de corps after working all summer with the Suffolk County department of labor.

expected to complete at least six hours of education weekly. Environmental education is taught at the worksite as the corps members study basic ecological concepts and conservation techniques. Through the "WRD" or writing, reading and discussion program, issues especially important to youth such as global environmental awareness, importance of ethics, personal responsibility and social problems are explored. As corps members leave the program at summer's end to enter the work force or return to school, they have acquired a usable resume and a great deal of experience in working hard as part of a team.

For many youngsters, the summer Conservation Corps is the first job that they have had. With the emphasis on teamwork and the production of quality work, the young men and women are taught valuable work habits that will last a lifetime. Conservation Corps jobs are advertised as physically hard work with modest pay and extraordinary benefits. Participants learn proper use of hand tools, construction techniques and safety awareness in daily "tailgate" sessions. Emphasis also is placed on being part of a national youth service movement which shows that teenagers can make a difference as a positive

resource in their own community. Corps members are viewed by their communities as assets rather than liabilities.

New York State Parks awards summer grants to local sponsoring organizations, such as state agencies, county and municipal governments, Indian Nations and not-for-profit corporations to operate New York State Conservation Corps projects. Project sponsors provide work projects, 20 percent in local funding, and the expertise to accomplish the environmental and youth development goals of the New York State Conservation Corps. Local sponsorship allows each crew to best serve the home community, while the framework of the New York Conservation Corps provides a sense of belonging to a positive statewide effort.

Project sponsors can be found throughout New York State, ranging from Long Island to Franklin County to the Niagara Frontier. Work projects are as varied as the sponsors. In a Harlem neighborhood, corps members of the Parks Council of New York City worked with a landscape architect and local school to revitalize a garbage-strewn vacant lot. Corps members completed the first phase of the

plan which eventually will produce a community garden with raised beds, wheelchair accessible paths, a stage and outdoor education area and a gazebo. As a result of the project, other neighborhood residents are taking active measures to maintain the areas around their homes.

Other sponsors are involved in historic preservation and archaeological restoration projects. Typical of these projects is the Schoharie Crossing State Historic Site where the New York State Conservation Corps completed the difficult and needed task of restoring the Empire Locks on the Erie Canal. These locks are the only place along the entire stretch of the canal where the original Erie Canal, the enlarged canal and the present New York State Barge Canal can be viewed together. Over the years, vegetation had overgrown the enlarged double lock making it impossible for visitors at the site to experience the dimensions of the massive historic structure. Corps members diligently cleared brush and cleaned the stone blocks of the locks. Under the supervision of a master restoration carpenter, the corps was able to construct two bridges which simulated the catwalks which crossed the early

19th century lock gate. Further west along the Canal, the NYS Conservation Corps sponsored by the Idyllic Foundation has been helping since 1988 to restore the three-bay Erie Canal boat dry dock at Chittenango.

In northern New York, the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe provided work projects for young men and women in Franklin County. Tasks completed by corps members include the rebuilding of the fence around the Kateri Hall Center and a survey and water analysis of the streams throughout the reservation.

Near Ithaca, NYS Conservation Corps at the Cayuga Nature Center replaced dilapidated stairs and a foot bridge which led to 90 percent of the center's trails. Corps members also built a scenic waterfall overlook with wheelchair accessibility, developed trails on a recently acquired 40-acre parcel, completed resource inventories, planted trees and developed teaching tools for the Cayuga Nature Center's environmental education programs.

A veteran of the youth service model is the conservation corps in the St. Lawrence County, administered by the county's Youth Bureau and Forestry Department and DEC. In addition



Corps members built an observation blind so that visitors to Allegany State Park might enjoy watching the wildlife on this marsh.



Corps members replace a handicapped accessible boardwalk at the Indian Creek Nature Center, Town of Canton. The original boardwalk was built by the YCC during the 1970s.

to New York State Conservation Corps funding, the St. Lawrence Corps, which has a total of six crews throughout the county, has also included support from New York State Division for Youth, the Private Industry Council and local legislators to operate their corps. An example of their work projects is the construction of a 750-foot-long handicapped accessible boardwalk at the Indian Creek Nature Center in Canton. This boardwalk replaced one originally built by the Youth Conservation Corps in the mid-1970s. Massena area corps members assisted DEC biologists with their annual Wilson Hill Wildlife Refuge wild goose drive as they penned, tagged and compiled statistics on geese. The St. Lawrence effort is an excellent example of how the corps model can be used effectively by diverse agencies to accomplish goals that otherwise may not be realized in an era of funding shortfalls.


These projects are but a few examples of the remarkable community service accomplished by the young men and women of

the New York State Conservation Corps and their sponsors. Like their predecessors of the 1930s and 1940s, corps members' attitudes toward their efforts are positive and enduring. They have made a lasting contribution to the greater good of society and the goals of the youth corps effort: accomplishment through teamwork, community service and the building of self-esteem in young workers.

The view of New York State Conservation Corps participants could be summed up by what Shaunie Giddings, a member of the corps at Newark Developmental Disabilities Service Office's work at the Spring Farm, said of her summer accomplishments, "When I leave the job I hope to walk away knowing that I have truly helped other people."

In the next century, Shaunie and her contemporaries will need to remember the warning that Leo Downey passed on to them at Letchworth State Park, "You've got to answer for yourself." This message is also reflected in a mirror pin which is given to

every corps member with a line from a Michael Jackson song: "If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself."

State parks commissioner Orin Lehman summed up the feelings of many when he noted, "The young men and women who serve in the New York State Conservation Corps of today follow in the honored tradition of President Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. Like the CCC, they are making valuable contributions towards preserving our natural resources and enhancing the quality of life for their own generation — and for those who will follow." 

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In an effort to commemorate the accomplishments of the Civilian Conservation Corps in New York State, State Parks has convened a Civilian Conservation Corps Task Force. Sites for a potential Civilian Conservation Corps interpretative center will be identified and information concerning the Civilian Conservation Corps contributions to our state parks, forests and open spaces will be collected. For more information contact:

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