

## 'Boys of CCCs' made America better

America was celebrating in the days following the end of our involvement in the First World War, the "war to end all wars." No one on that November 1918 day realized the next two decades of relative posterity were to soon wane and events would abruptly bring our nation to her knees. Millions of boys, many not yet born, would work together to lift the country back on its feet. They were from all walks of life, all colors and all nationalities but collectively they were to be known as the Tree Army, the Civilian Conservation Corp, the CCC, or simply call them "The Boys." Each enrollee joined the ranks of young men who eventually worked their way through the Great Depression, changed the landscape of this country and succeeded in writing pages in American history. Sadly, that history is often forgotten today.

In this exhibit, we will remember the daily lives of those men, how the CCC came to be, and question how this nation would be today without the sweat and commitment of those young men.

America was in a financial upswing after World War I. Men were returning from the War to find easy credit to procure the "high tech" items of the day. Purchasing meant production and production meant jobs for Americans. Labor-saving home appliances were to be had by consumers. "Paying over time," was the new monetary inspiration. Soon the former soldiers and their families were leaving the forests and fields and moving to the growing, and eventually over-populated, cities. In 1926 for example, over 1,000,000 Americans made this transition. During that time New Orleans increased in population and became a center for the arts in an Art Deco world. Young women began trading hand-sewn, feed sack dresses and gabardine garb for glitzy flapper attire. Most felt America was on the fast track to what was thought to be a never-ending prosperity. The rest of the world had a similar outlook.

Even with the exodus of workers from the farmlands of the state, new farm technologies filled the reduced labor force and, in fact, increased productivity over the nation's entire breadbasket. After the phenomenal crop of 1926, farmers continued to use their recently purchased tractors to plow the land and replant the same crop without rotation. They cultivated millions of acres of secondary grasslands and used this virgin acreage with no regard to environmental repercussions. The rich lands in Louisiana hummed with the sounds of mechanized agriculture. Along with the weather, the ramifications from the farmers' disregard would soon lay waste to our fertile farmland and generate a major objective that would be assaulted by the Army.

In the mid-1920's, America was just becoming aware of conservation but the demand for timber had been expanding without environmental considerations for decades. In the first

quarter of the Twentieth Century increased demands for Louisiana timber continued clear-cutting policies over millions of acres without any, or at least inadequate, attempts at reforestation. No one can say for sure if that was caused by apathy on the part of private landowners and the federal government, lack of foresight, or a shortage of human resources and funds to complete the task. As with the farmers' disregard for the land, the CCC would play the major role in rectifying the Louisiana forestland issues years in the making.

The issue of mosquito control had been a major health concern for years. Beginning just before the War, insect infested standing water had been coated with fuel oil or kerosene to kill the mosquito larvae before the resulting mature adults spread dreaded malaria. Louisiana has vast breeding locations so stagnate backwaters needed to be bled dry. But that required manpower willing to challenge the countless hazards of the swamps. This was to become yet another challenge that would be turned over to the Boys.

## CCCs put men to work in Depression



In 1933, America was deep in the Great Depression when newly-elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 6101, the legislation creating the Civilian Conservation Corp. The CCC, Roosevelt's "tree army," was born. Masses of unemployed young men joined the Corp and before disbanding in 1942 the count was in the millions.

The enrollees signed on for an initial six month tour of duty in the Corp. The Boys, as they were collectively called, were taken from cities and rural areas and assigned to camps administered by the military. For logistical reasons, the young men were usually relocated as close to their homes as possible.

Each CCC camp was located in the general area of particular conservation work and organized around a compliment of up to 200 enrollees in a designated numbered "company" unit. Each camp was structured to generally have barracks for 50 enrollees each, officers/technical staff quarters, medical dispensary, mess hall, recreation hall/dayroom, education building, lavatory, technical/administrative offices, tool room/blacksmith shop and motor pool garages.



The enrollees were organized into work detail units called "sections" of 25 men each, according to the barracks they resided in. Each section had a "leader" and "assistant leader" who were accountable for the men at work and in the barracks.

New arrivals that showed aptitude were assigned duties as cooks, mechanics, clerks or even medical assistants. Most new enrollees were assigned as site workers, the foot soldiers of the camp. Regardless of an enrollee's assigned duties, every enrollee was a candidate for advancement to assistant leader or leader.



Leaders provided knowledge of the work at hand and guidance for inexperienced enrollees. Over this CCC company organization each camp had a dual-authority supervisory staff: Department of War personnel, generally reserve officers, who were responsible for overall camp operation, logistics, education and training; and technical service civilians, a camp "superintendent" and "foreman," employed by the Departments of Interior or Agriculture, responsible for the type of field work.

When an enrollee reached his camp, he was issued two uniforms and a small cardboard box that contained items such as soap, razor, a toothbrush, tooth powder and so on. New arrivals were tutored in personal hygiene, something that was often lacking in their previous years.

After the \$25 family allotment was sent home, the enrollee was left with \$5 of personal pay, a lot more than other men of their age in the nearby area. After all, a pouch of tobacco was a nickel as was a supply of cigarette papers or a Coke. A pack of Lucky Strike was eleven cents and a sundae was fifteen. The five bucks went a long way considering the camp provided the enrollee's daily necessities. In locales where an enrollee was allowed to leave camp, some nearby movie theaters provided discounts or issued free tickets for the Boys as a way to show thanks for their CCC service.

A new camp in an area was met with mixed emotions from the locals. The added revenue from the CCC eased the depression's impact but having hundreds of new young male faces did not go unnoticed by civilian male suitors along with mothers of dating age daughters. Fathers kept tabs on everything of value in fear of criminals lurking among the CCC ranks. Enrollees seemed to have silver dollars rattling in their pocket in a time when a dependable income of any amount was rare.

Dayrooms were the free time centers of the camp. Enrollees could relax, grab a soft drink or make use of the small library.



A number of enrollees, in some camps over 50 percent, were classified as illiterate. Many boys used CCC classes or personal instruction to learn to read and write. Many later earned a high school diploma and some continued to college degrees.