

The CCC: Great and Lasting Good

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By Jerry Simmons

Much is said about government involvement in everyday lives of Americans, but little discussion is heard about a government program that was once touted as making a “Great and Lasting Good” for the American people.

In the early 1930s there were some 14 million people out of work and many of them (some estimate nearly a quarter million) were wandering around the country trying to find jobs. The causes of the horrific economic downturn known as the Great Depression have been debated



Brewton's CCC camp, located along the banks of Burnt Corn Creek, about where Arby's is now

and argued with little agreement on either side. Many political pundits blame President Herbert Hoover and the Republicans for it, while others blame an overzealous Wall Street. Still others fault the Democrats for beginning a welfare mentality.

Whatever the reasons and results, the Depression's immediate effects were immeasurable in human suffering. One good that came from it was perhaps the most successful and best known of the New Deal programs pushed by President Franklin Roosevelt: the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Roosevelt proposed to put 500,000 unemployed men from cities and towns into the woods to plant trees, reduce fire hazards, clear streams, check erosion, and improve the parks system all across America. The speed was remarkable at which legislation was written, passed, and funded creating an alphabet soup of projects in hopes of generating useful work and necessary paychecks.

The book, “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Alabama, 1933-1942,” states that “CCC projects in [just] Alabama would initially employ 20,000 men with projects in all 13 state forests and seven state parks.” The volume, recently published by The University of Alabama Press and written by Robert Pasquill, traces in detail the projects, the living conditions, the daily lives of the enrollees, the administration and management challenges, and the lasting effects of this New Deal program in Alabama.

Referred to by many names (“Roosevelt's Tree Army” and the “Forgotten Soldiers”) the work of the CCC is still visible - if you know where to look - be it a terraced field, a stone

structure in a state park, or a majestic fire tower standing tall over the pines.

It was a truly monumental win-win situation emerging from a national and international economic tragedy.

The Corps was comprised of several divisions of men throughout the nation. In the Fourth Corps Area, with a total of 198 camps, Alabama had seventeen, Florida twenty-two, Georgia thirty-nine, Louisiana twenty-three, Mississippi sixteen, North Carolina thirty, South Carolina eighteen, and Tennessee thirty-three. The area employed nearly 40,000 men.

One of the many men interviewed for the book mentioned above was Willie Carter of Century. Reverend Carter was born in 1921 in Greenville, Alabama, with a younger brother and sister. When he was about 12, the family moved to Florida to find better educational opportunities for blacks.

In October 1940, Willie enlisted in the CCC in Lynn Haven, Florida. He was sent to Company 4454-C at Camp P-80 in Panama City. He worked at cutting fire lines and ditches and building roads in a privately-owned forest. He recalls filling dump trucks with shovels, since there were no front-end loaders in that day.

He'd completed high school and was assigned to work with the Camp Educational Advisor. Earning \$30 each month, he taught algebra and helped other enrollees write their letters. He was given \$8 and \$22 was sent home to his family. Meals and uniforms were provided at no charge.

Willie was given the job of running the Company Canteen. As canteen clerk, he also received a commission. Many months he made over \$15 in commission, giving him a total of \$45 in a month, more money than a company Leader. For a period of time, he worked at Camp Stewart, Georgia, an Army post, and even the \$30 monthly was more than the \$21 monthly the soldiers were receiving. He says the soldiers weren't too happy about that.

The Post Exchange was open from 5 to 10 pm each day. During the day, he would do paperwork, and after 5 pm the field workers bought candy, gum, soft drinks, toiletries, stationary and ice cream, among other items.

Carter recalled that the camp food was wonderful. It was cooked and served "home style." This was his first time away from home, quite a change for that young man.

Reverend Carter noted that back in those days, teenagers followed orders. He recalled that the linen on their cots was changed twice each week, and the cots were taken out into the sunshine once each week.

He was discharged from the CCC in July 1942. He stayed in camp for several weeks after the CCC was officially ended to complete the inventories of the canteen. He was drafted into the Army in 1943 and assigned to an amphibious unit working with the "Ducks" [a six-wheel GMC truck with a watertight hull enclosure designated model number DUKW by General Motors]. He was among the thousands who landed at Normandy Beach on D-Day plus 6 (June 12, 1944) and fought in France and Belgium.

The CCC helped Reverend Carter achieve his goal of being a teacher, plus the money he sent home helped his family survive the Great Depression.

Willie has good memories of the CCC and says that hard work never did any harm to him or to Henry Bright of Century, who was also a member of his camp. Another friend Willie made in the CCC was a somewhat local boy, Willie Bailey, of Milton.

After WW II most young men, while understandably proud of their military service, pre-

ferred to talk about their CCC experiences. Those who lived and worked in the camps learned useful trades and habits, especially self-reliance.

In addition, the Army reported that ex-CCC boys were in much better shape than those who had not been in the Corps. They were generally brighter and learned new jobs more quickly. Willie Carter stated he learned how to get along with people and developed social skills he might not have otherwise - perhaps that is part of the "Great and Lasting Good."

Y'all come.