

The Civilian Conservation Corps: The New Deal's Most Popular Program

Shortly after taking office in March of 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed a bill into law creating the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC, as it was commonly known, provided jobs and training for unemployed young men during the depths of the Great Depression. It soon became one of the most well-respected and enduring New Deal programs. Enlistees were initially composed of men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five; these parameters were later expanded to take in men both younger and older, including World War I veterans. All received thirty dollars per month to build dams, plant trees, and pursue other conservation-oriented tasks. Usually living at camps in remote areas, the men were supervised both by the Army and other government agencies, depending upon their location.

From an initial enrollment of approximately 52,000 in the summer of 1933, the CCC soon found its ranks swelling to almost 560,000 men at peak enlistment in October of 1935; the number of participants later stabilized at about 300,000. The "CCC boys" followed a rigid, military-style daily schedule: reveille at 6:00 A.M., followed by physical training and breakfast, then to work by 7:45. Lunch was served in the field at noon, and work continued until 4:00 P.M. At 5:30, they ate dinner and afterwards engaged in athletic competitions, theatrical productions, or educational activities until lights-out at 10:00 o'clock.

The accomplishments of the CCC stand as testament to the program's success. Enlistees, totaling over 2.5 million men over a nine-year span, planted 2.25 billion trees, constructed 6 million check dams, built 122,000 miles of truck



A Civilian Conservation Corps fire crew training on a California national forest in 1933. Firefighting constituted one of more important special tasks that CCC units performed. Over the duration of the program, twenty-nine enrollees died fighting forest fires. Forest Service photo.



CCC enrollees construct a telephone line across a portion of the Monongahela National Forest, West Virginia. In addition to more traditional conservation-oriented work, the CCC made an impressive contribution to the expansion both of telephone and electric services across the country. Forest Service photo.

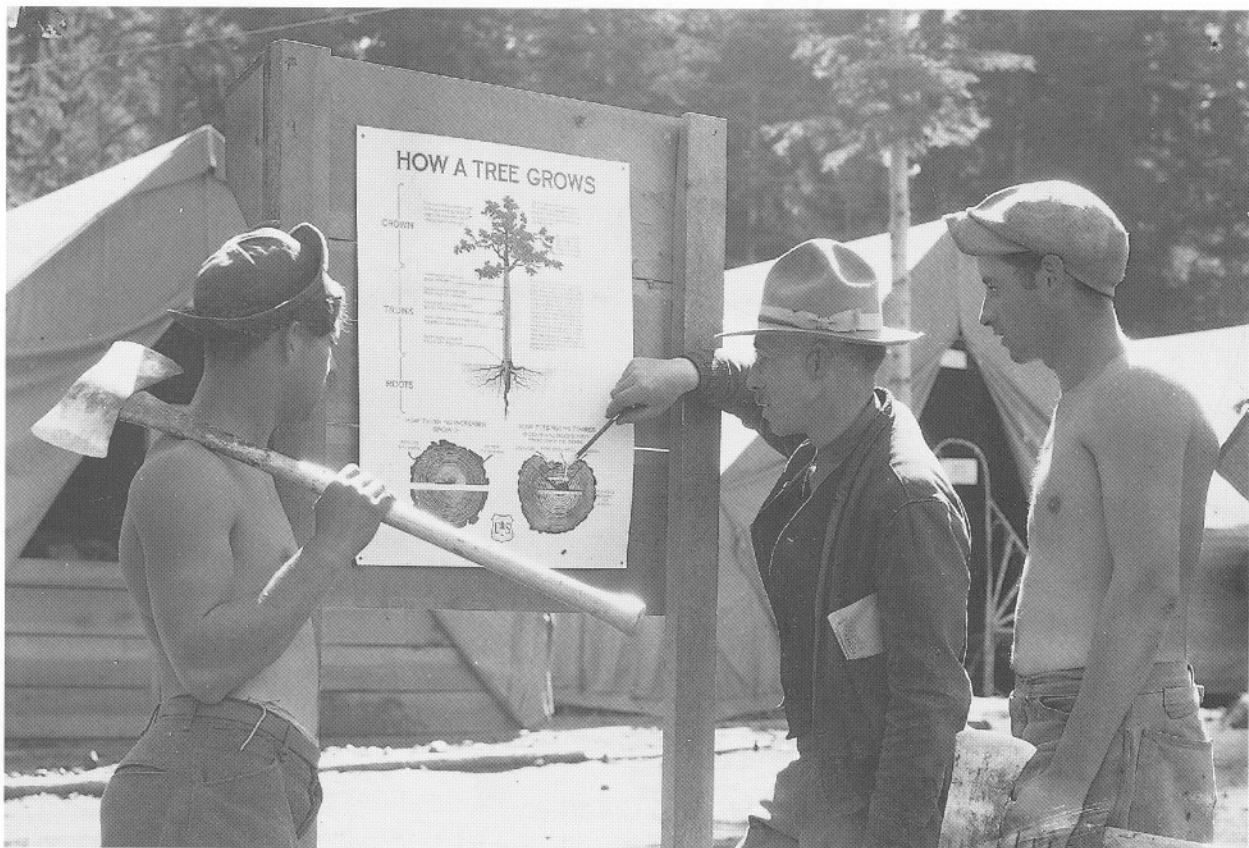
President Franklin D. Roosevelt visited the first CCC camp at Big Meadows, Virginia, on August 12, 1933. Roosevelt took a personal interest in the CCC from the beginning and kept close track of the program throughout its tenure. Seated, from left to right: Major General Paul B. Malone, U.S. Army, Commanding Officer, 3d Corps. Area; Louis McHenry Howe, secretary to the president; Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes; Robert Fechner, director of the CCC; President Roosevelt; Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace; Undersecretary Rexford G. Tugwell. Forest History Society photo.

trails, cut firebreaks and actively fought forest fires, and cleared picnic grounds in many state parks, national parks, and national forests. Wildlife restoration projects included the building of fish-rearing ponds and waterfowl nesting areas. Interestingly, they also planted kudzu, now the scourge of the South, in an effort to halt soil erosion. By the time the program ended in June of 1942, a victim of wartime employment demands and political compromise, its success

was unparalleled among New Deal relief programs. It provided not only economic and environmental benefits for the U.S., but, perhaps equally important, also contributed greatly to the health and morale of the young men who served. The "CCC boys" forged strong bonds that exist even today: an alumni association meets regularly, and participation in the Civilian Conservation Corps is fondly remembered as a formative experience in many lives.



The interior of a CCC barracks, January 1933. Each camp typically included four such structures in addition to a mess hall, a recreation hall, administration buildings, officers' quarters, garages, and a latrine block. Often a school-house was built as well, and mobile libraries served each camp. In this photo, taken at the Presque Isle Camp near Onaway, Michigan, the permanent stoves have not yet been installed. Michigan Department of Conservation photo.



Superintendent Frank S. Robinson of the U.S. Forest Service explains the growth of a tree to two CCC boys in camp at Lassen National Forest, California. The CCC played a major role in protecting forests against damage from insects—especially bark beetles and gypsy moths—and diseases such as blister rust. Forest Service photo.



Top: Morning roll-call being conducted at a camp in Chippewa National Forest, Minnesota, 1940. At this time, work assignments and other announcements were made, and the Army camp supervisors handed the boys off to Forest Service control for the day's work. In other areas, Park Service employees performed job supervision while the Army ran the camps. After 1939, most CCC enrollees had received the standard, spruce-green uniform shown here, which was ordered by President Roosevelt to bolster morale. Forest Service photo.

Work continued year-around for the CCC boys, as demonstrated in this photo of a typical crew in the Northeast, c. 1938. They were engaged in clearing timber following a hurricane blow-down earlier in the year. Official policy stipulated that camps be racially segregated, but this photo suggests that the policy may not have been strictly enforced. S. F. Stevens photo.