

The Civilian Conservation Corps in Yellowstone National Park, 1933 - 1942

Yellowstone, the world's first national park, participated fully in one of the New Deal's most popular and successful programs. In early 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt proposed the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) as one of his first ideas for relieving unemployment during the Great Depression. Almost three million young unmarried men took part in this program during its nine years, carrying out needed conservation work in national and state parks and forests across the country while sending dollars home to support their families. Many came away with useful skills as well as hope for the future. The very size of the C.C.C. effort was a sign of national confidence.

The C.C.C. camps in Yellowstone and their administration followed the model laid out in Washington. The Labor Department chose the enrollees, the Army set up and ran the camps, and the National Park Service chose and directed the work projects. The act creating the corps had been signed by Roosevelt on March 31, 1933. Two months later, on June 2, the first contingents of men for three camps arrived in Yellowstone. These camps were at Mammoth, Canyon, and Lake, three of the focal points for the administration and operation of the park. The main companies for each camp arrived on June 7, two hundred men at each location. By June 23, a fourth company was in camp along the West Gallatin Road in Yellowstone's northwest corner. Each camp had approximately twenty-five men from the three states of which Yellowstone is a part: Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. The rest of the eight hundred men were mostly recruited from New York State, all but a few natives of New York City itself. Understandably, start-up took time. The camp buildings were constructed by the enrollees, many of whom were in the corps because they needed to acquire work skills. Weeding out "undesirables and trouble makers" ("Superintendent's Annual Report for 1933," p.22) also took time, but once done, morale and the rate at which work could be accomplished greatly improved. The "Superintendent's Annual Report for 1933" describes the work of the corps that summer as "the repair of telephone lines, bank erosion control, and roadside clean-up, clean-up of old dump grounds, campground clean-up, truck trail construction, construction of fire protection trails, landscaping, range improvements, reforestation, insect control, removal of old fences, repairing and building of new fences, removal of old buildings and fire suppression work." Many of the projects were labor-intensive ones which would have a direct effect on how the visitors saw and enjoyed the park and on how efficiently the National Park Service would be able to carry out its dual task of protecting the park's resources and providing for their enjoyment by the public.

The maximum number of park employees that year, exclusive of the C.C.C., was 563, 74 of whom were permanent employees and 489 temporary workers. The Depression was having an adverse effect on the size of the park staff, and it was the C.C.C., as well as other special employment programs such as the Works Progress Administration, which allowed Yellowstone to continue to operate at an acceptable level and to make improvements from which we benefit today.

Yellowstone's winter weather, frequently lasting from late October into April, made four year-round camps unrealistic. Through the nine years of the C.C.C.'s existence, the Mammoth camp near park headquarters operated

all year, as did sometimes a second camp in the same general area. The remaining camps would be re-established each summer, usually by transferring entire companies from areas as nearby as Jackson Hole or as far away as Indiana. With the addition of camps at Old Faithful and on the Snake River near the South Entrance in the summer of 1934, there were six camps (1200 men) in Yellowstone. Two side camps were established as outposts from the larger camps. One, on the southeast arm of Yellowstone Lake, allowed completion of a warehouse and dock started in 1933, and one near the Bechler Ranger Station in the park's southwest corner built a telephone line to Boundary Creek Patrol Cabin.

In this second year of the program work projects got off to a fast start. A shortage of trucks and sometimes of tools was a problem, but morale, according to the Superintendent's Annual Report, was high. The relation between the park administration and the army officers supervising the camps was also reported as being very good. In subsequent years, a recurring problem at the beginning of each summer was the difficulty of recruiting a sufficient number of well qualified men to be direct supervisors of the C.C.C. work projects. Apparently recruitment efforts sometimes extended through the entire summer. Occasionally other difficulties slowed the work; for example, the quarantining of two camps for scarlet fever during the summer of 1935.

Camp life included education. Each camp's "education advisor" held classes on academic subjects particularly for those enrollees needing remedial work. They also organized talks, programs, and educational trips. And park rangers and ranger-naturalists regularly presented talks to the enrollees on various aspects of Yellowstone National Park.

The following list of work projects culled from the "Superintendent's Annual Reports" from 1933 to 1942 gives an idea of the scope of the C.C.C.'s involvement in the operation and protection of Yellowstone:

Preparation of museum specimens and photographic work

Insect control (removal of trees affected by pine bark beetles, et al.)

Service as smoke chasers assigned to ranger stations around the park (first attack on forest fires. Forest fire fighting, in the days when all fires were extinguished regardless of origin, was a major use of C.C.C. labor. They also assisted in the national forests surrounding Yellowstone. Hundreds of enrollees might be involved with one fire.)

Helped provide twenty-four hour service on the Mammoth telephone switchboard

Construction of buildings ranging from many of those at the Lamar Buffalo Ranch to the residences in Lower Mammoth, sheds and utility buildings throughout the park's developed areas.

Renovation of buildings, such as the Mammoth Canteen, still a focus of many of the recreational activities of the employees at the park headquarters during the winter.

Removal of unneeded buildings.

Installation of water and sewer systems.

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Landscaping in developed areas.

Operation of a large tree nursery at Stevens Creek for reforestation projects in Yellowstone and other parks.

Fence construction and removal of old fence.

Construction of look-outs.

Assistance to the rangers in the yearly culling of the Northern Yellowstone elk herd.

Fire pre-suppression work (reduction of fuel loads along the roads, etc.)

Litter pick-up along Yellowstone's more than 300 miles of roadsides.

Classroom assistance to the Mammoth area school teacher.

Trail maintenance.

Building maintenance.

Snow removal around park headquarters buildings.

Dump and road clean-up.

Construction of campground facilities including restrooms, amphitheatres, and tables.

Construction of telephone lines.

Building and repair of elk traps and corrals.

With the coming of World War Two, there were fewer and fewer men available for the C.C.C. Yellowstone's four camps at the start of 1942 were at 50% enrollment and rapidly losing ground. The last two camps were closed in July of that year (Lake and Mammoth). The buildings at the Mammoth and Cascade Creek camps were turned over to the War Relocation Authority and moved to Heart Mountain near Cody, Wyoming. One of the few remaining camp buildings in Yellowstone is used today as the headquarters for the Young Adult Conservation Corps camp at Mammoth Hot Springs.

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