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THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS (CCC) IN YOSEMITE



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THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS (CCC) IN YOSEMITE

“I enlisted as a teenager and came out a man.” This sentiment, expressed by a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollee assigned to Yosemite National Park, was likely typical of the 250,000 unemployed young men recruited into President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s CCC in March 1933. It is a comment that reflects just one of Roosevelt’s far-reaching goals in creating a dedicated corps of American youth who would be trained to complete dozens of wide-ranging work projects on federal and state-owned land—projects dealing with fire, floods, soil conservation, plant, pest and disease control, as well as the construction of trails and national park landmarks that we take pride in today.

In his message to Congress urging passage of this Emergency Conservation Work Bill, Roosevelt envisioned that “the CCC would conserve our precious natural resources and pay dividends to the present and future generations. More important, we can take a vast army of unemployed young adults into healthful surroundings.” On March 31, 1933, Roosevelt signed the bill into law and six days later ordered the formation of the CCC.¹

It is estimated that in 1932, of the young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four who were in the labor market, perhaps one in four was unemployed. At the time the federal government was trying to cope with the plight of these unemployed youths, it was also trying to cope with another wasted resource: American forests. Forests had once covered 800,000,000 acres of the continental United States, but by 1933 there were only 100,000,000 acres of virgin timber left. Thanks to the bounty of American timberlands, the country’s early economy was substantially based on wood. Lumber,

ships, pitch, turpentine, potash, and paper were among the first American exports. Until after the Civil War, it was assumed this source of national wealth was inexhaustible. But with the start of the Industrial Revolution, immigration and passage of the 1862 Homestead Act pushed waves of settlement into and through the forests. In addition, as land grants in the public domain were awarded to the railroads, even more forest and timberland began to disappear from the American scenery.

The Civilian Conservation Corps served as a catalyst, bringing together two wasted resources: the young men and the land. The CCC was not for everyone, but was restricted to young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They had to be physically fit, unemployed, and unmarried, and had to be willing to make allotments from their salaries to their families. The Department of Labor, operating through local public relief agencies, selected the enrollees. Each enrollment period was for six months, from May to October and from October to April, which could be extended for up to two years or longer if a man was promoted to a leadership job. Typical pay for a CCC enrollee was thirty dollars a month, with a twenty-five dollar allotment going to the enrollee’s family. Clair Nelson, a CCC recruit who worked in Buck Meadows, remembers “poker and craps kept some of the boys in perpetual debt. They collected their pay, made the rounds paying off carefully documented debts, and, with their money gone, almost immediately began the borrowing process over again.”²

The leaders of the National Park Service, realizing that the CCC was a potential bonanza for the national parks, worked to get the program started in the spring and

summer of 1933. By mid-May, the National Park Service was prepared to open sixty-three camps accommodating 12,600 men for work in national parks and monuments. A total of ten CCC camps were located in Yosemite National Park during the life span of the CCC (May 1933 to October 1940) with 6,816 CCC enrollees assigned.³ These camps were strategically located and, in some cases, time controlled in order

CCC at work constructing log benches, August 1934.



PHOTO BY DON CHRISTIANSEN, COURTESY OF YOSEMITE RESEARCH LIBRARY.

to accomplish specific work projects. CCC Company 942 was designated as the service company for Yosemite and was located in the park for nine years. The CCC Cascades Camp, first located at Cascade Creek on Highway 140, was wiped out in the 1937 flood. It was then relocated to the El Capitan area at the base of the Old Big Oak Flat Road. The Buck Meadows Camp was in Buck Meadows, along Highway 120.⁴

Once a camp was organized, the normal complement of men ranged from between 225 and 250. Of these, about 200 were enrollees from the city, twenty-five to thirty were local enrollees, and fifteen to twenty were locally experienced men (LEMs). The park service was allowed to hire a small number of skilled local experienced men who brought knowledge of local climate, vegetation, building materials and practices, and environmental conditions. Leighroy Davis, a Cascade recruit, recalled his work superintendent, William Mayhall:

*"He was known by everyone as "Wild Bill Mayhall," though nobody, but nobody, ever called him by that name to his face. He was a man's man that commanded full respect, and any knot head that didn't give it to him had to be out of his gourd. At a glance, when you first saw him, you might believe he was an old man. But don't let that grey hair and ruddy complexion fool you. The man stood over six foot two, had real large shoulders that tapered down to a very narrow waistline and hips. In spite of his age he was still as light and spry on his feet with the strength of a Brahma Bull. In the old days, he had been the superintendent of a thousand-man logging camp."*⁵

Seven or eight local men served as foremen and camp superintendents aided by two to five regular army personnel. An enrollee designated "camp sergeant" carried out orders issued by the army captain and supervised the camp. The sergeant took roll, held evening retreat (complete with bugler and flag salute), and maintained the camp in a generally clean and orderly state. Nelson recalls that while this could have been a difficult job, it seldom was because peer pressure kept the more slovenly in line while the worst offenders found themselves isolated or sent home. That was the last thing most of them wanted. One former CCC recruit recalls helping scrub a guy with GI laundry soap and scrub brush in a washtub because he would never take a shower.

HALF DOME CABLES, APPLE TREES, AND FERN SPRINGS

One of the most outstanding achievements of the Cascade recruits was the rebuilding of the stairway ascending the eastern face of Half Dome in May 1934. The Half Dome cables, which had been installed about 1920 by the Sierra Club, were replaced and strengthened by the CCC. The objective was to replace 429 feet of 3/8-inch cable with 7/8-inch galvanized iron cable and also to

replace thirty-nine pipe posts with stronger 1-inch pipe. A stub camp was established at the base of the dome. Workers drilled forty-one holes averaging seven inches in depth by hand in the rock for the new pipe posts. Each man was tied with a piece of rope to the pipe posts while he was drilling to prevent slipping or falling. New wooden steps were installed at the base of each pair of posts so that hikers could rest at these points. Although the weather had been perfect before work began, when enrollees set up camp and started the task, it suddenly changed. Every afternoon a storm blew in with rain, hail, or snow combined with high winds and work had to be discontinued. The stairway was eventually finished later that summer.⁶

Cascade enrollees made many improvements at Yosemite Village. They installed log curbing and new paths, and planted ferns, trees, and shrubs along the foundations around the administration building, new hospital, residences, and the Yosemite Museum. Native plants removed from various places outside the valley were transplanted around government residences. CCC workers also revitalized the historic 250 apple trees planted by James Lamon, one of the first settlers in Yosemite Valley in 1868.

Village improvements continued as workers placed flagstones around the telescopes in front of the museum. Over a six-month period beginning in April 1935, 1,973 pine and cedar trees and thirty-six quaking aspens were planted in the barren areas fronting the road at Camps 7 and 15 (Lower and Upper River campgrounds). Under the direction of the park naturalist, enrollees from the Cascades Camp transformed the garden around the Yosemite Museum into a wildflower meadow featuring a spring and a stream.⁷

CCC work in Yosemite also included rehabilitating springs to make them safe sources of drinking water. Enrollees turned Fern Spring (located just beyond the Pohono Bridge on the way into Yosemite Valley) into an attractive naturalistic rock garden by artistically arranging rocks at the site and planting a variety of ferns, wildflowers, and ground covers. A log guardrail was installed to define the parking area, and log seats were placed in the woods around the spring to improve the popular spot. To this day, Fern Spring is a traditional stopping point for Yosemite visitors.

FIRE-FIGHTING, DYNAMITING AND BADGER PASS

Forest fire suppression was an important duty of the Yosemite CCC camps and they maintained a fully trained and ready fire suppression crew along with search and rescue teams. Reminiscences of CCC Yosemite alumni include countless stories of fighting wildfires. John Newcomb remembers walking with a firefighting crew to within two miles of the first fire he had ever experienced and, while the "bosses got together and talked about how



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CCC fire crew.

the best way to fight the fire, the fire jumped the road and they had to run for their lives.”⁸

Clair Nelson recalls being assigned to the fire suppression crew at Buck Meadows under the supervision of foreman Bill Fiske, a local fire fighter:

“My romantic notions about fire fighters were soon shattered however. The crew was based at the local ranger station because it was a natural communications center. But fires were few and far between. What do fire fighters do when there are no fires? Easy! Ranger Neil Perkins had plenty of jobs. Large patches of underbrush had to be cleared--a hot and tedious task at best. At least we learned to use the brush hook without killing ourselves.”⁹

In addition to fire fighting, CCC recruits at the Buck Meadows Camp also built miles of access roads.¹⁰ Building these roads in the 1930s was not without its danger since dynamite was frequently used. Darrel Stover, a CCC enrollee assigned to the construction crew, had the job of transporting the dynamite. Stover recalls, “The dynamite was carefully stowed in the back of one truck and I rode in the cab of a second truck holding the caps on my lap.” He remembers one job removing an enormous stump on the old Coulterville Road:¹¹

“The road had to make a very sharp turn around this stump, located in a small gully. Too large to cut out, the only solution was dynamite. The LEM on our crew was Cecil “Pop” Benda, a bohemian about 55 years old who claimed to be a powder expert and was given the powder monkey appointment.¹² Benda and I dug holes under the stump in several places, opened the box of 30% Hercules

powder and he started putting sticks in place. I knew that clearing land of timber, two sticks were enough to blow stumps. After a half dozen, I said, “Pop, plenty.” He said, “No, we need a lot more” and ended up putting half of the box around under the stump, and with the caps in place, attached the wires to the magneto detonator. Benda yelled, “fire in hole” three times in his bohemian accent, and pushed down the plunger. After the ground stopped shaking, the dirt, rocks and wood stopped falling, and the dust cleared, we looked at the results. Pop did a bang up job, as the stump was gone. But it took three big dump truck loads of dirt to fill in the crater!”¹³

Corpsmen at the Buck Meadows Camp also worked on a woods crew, clearing roadsides, building campgrounds and picnic areas, cutting firewood, clearing brush and planting trees, in addition to helping surveyors. Clair Nelson assisted Ranger Paul Struble in surveying the western boundary of the Stanislaus National Forest between the Tuolumne and Merced Rivers. For two months they hunted benchmarks, measured distances by chain, and posted signs distinguishing between interspersed Forest Service lands and private parcels. As Nelson says, “Attempting to follow a compass line down into river canyons, over hills and peaks, and through gullies and creek beds was a strenuous experience. On the boundary survey, we followed the proper direction in spite of the terrain.”¹⁴

The CCC camps in Yosemite National Park completed numerous significant improvements that are still visible today. They constructed view areas at Glacier Point, Henness Ridge, Crane Flat Lookout, and North Mountain



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CCC crew removing invasive plants.

Lookout towers; constructed the entrance station at Arch Rock; and developed grove areas of the Big Trees, including construction of native wood barriers, identification signs, walking paths, and rest areas; and developed new campgrounds and improved existing ones. The Badger Pass ski complex, including the Ski House and ski runs, were built by CCC recruits. In August 1940, a stub camp was established at Ostrander Lake consisting of twenty enrollees, one carpenter, two stonemasons, and two foremen. Construction began on the Ski Hut at once and was ready for occupancy on October 26 of that year.

Many of the young men who joined the Civilian Conservation Corps learned skills and craftsmanship that would become their livelihood in later life. Other recruits brought skills with them learned from working on their family farms. Tim Ludington, the National Park Service's

Branch Chief for Roads and Trails, and crew supervisor for the California Conservation Corps Backcountry Trails Project said, "The real good rockmanship skills were lost when the Civilian Conservation Corps left Yosemite National Park. In 1970, Jim Snyder, former park historian, began looking at the way the old trails were built and adopted the techniques used by the CCC in the 1930s."¹⁵

The CCC gave desperate young men the chance to be gainfully employed, learn an occupation, receive an education, send money home, and earn self-respect and confidence in a time of social and economic chaos. In October 1993, a recognition and dedication program was held in Yosemite to honor and recognize the work accomplishments of the CCC in Yosemite National Park. A plaque was installed at the entrance to the Tuolumne Meadows Visitor Center honoring CCC participants. In one of the remembrances written by various CCC participants, Darrel Stover of Company 942, Camp Cascades #6, was asked if he would do it all over again. Stover replied, "Yes, I would do it all over again. It was a new life for a nineteen-year-old kid. I, like so many of the others, enlisted as a teenager and came out a man. And it happened in the most beautiful place in the world, Yosemite."

Lois Orr has volunteered for the National Park Service and Yosemite Association for the past seven years. She is currently working on a Master's degree in Women's History at Fresno Pacific University, and is volunteering on the Civilian Conservation Corps Oral History Project for the Resources Management & Science Division of the NPS. A major aspect of this project is to locate former CCC members who worked at any of the camps in Yosemite and arrange for the recording of their oral histories, which will then become a valued part of the history of Yosemite.

NOTES

1. Roger L. Rosentreter, Roosevelt's Tree Army, Michigan's Civilian Conservation Corps (24 May 2000) <http://www.sos.state.mi.us/history/museum/techstuff/depressn/treearmy.html>.

2. Clair Nelson. *Journal of Forest History, Remembering the CCC: Buck Meadows Camp CA 1933-34*, vol. 26, Oct. 82, 184-191.

3. Linda Flint McClelland, *Building the National Parks*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 350.

4. Anonymous, *Observations/ Remembrances CCC Binder*, Yosemite Research Library. In 1993, the National Park Service held a reunion of CCC

members stationed at Yosemite National Park. At the reunion, each CCC member was asked to fill out a sheet indicating the time he served, what he did, who he served with, etc. These remembrances are compiled into a binder at the Yosemite Library. Some of these remembrances did not have names on them.

5. Leighroy Davis, *Oral History, CCC binder*, Yosemite Research Library.

6. McClelland, 364.

7. McClelland, 434.

8. John Newcomb, *Experiences I Recall*, CCC binder, Yosemite Research Library.

9. Nelson, 188.

10. Also called trucktrails.

11. Old Coulterville Road parallels Highway 120, the northern route to Sacramento.

12. Powder monkey was the term given to the man that handled the dynamite and blasting.

13. Darrel E. Stover, CCC binder, Yosemite Research Library.

14. Clair Nelson, 190.

15. "Ideas in Motion: The Moral Equivalent," produced and directed by Jim Mayer and John Rogers, 15 min., KQED 1982, videotape.

The chart below shows the Civilian Conservation Corps camps in Yosemite National Park from 1933 to 1940. If you are familiar with any of these camps or know someone who might have worked in one of them, please contact Charles Palmer, Park Historian, at PO Box 700, El Portal, CA 95318, (209) 379-1378. The History, Architecture, and Landscapes Branch of the Division of Resources Management and Science would like to locate former CCC enrollees and take oral histories about their CCC experiences. This will be a valuable contribution to the current project.

LIST OF CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CAMPS IN YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK 1933-1940

Original YNP Project ID Number	USDI-NPS Project Identification Number	Official Camp Name and County Location	Dates of Occupancy	CCC Company Number
YNP-1	NP-15	Wawona #1, Wawona Mariposa County	5/15/33 to 11/14/33 4/16/34 to 10/26/34	915 529
YNP-2	NP-16	Wawona #2, Wawona Mariposa County	5/16/33 to 11/23/33 4/16/34 to 10/21/34	942 530
YNP-3	NP-17	Crane Flat Yosemite Nat. Park Tuolumne County	6/11/33 to 10/14/33 5/11/34 to 10/20/34 6/15/35 to 10/19/35 6/5/36 to 10/31/36 6/12/38 to 10/27/38 5/8/39 to 10/28/39 4/23/40 to 10/21/40 5/19/41 to 8/31/41	576 1551 1978 2926 1952 1952 5434 5490
YNP-4	NP-18	Eleven Mile Meadow YNP Mariposa County	6/7/33 to 10/14/33	577
YNP-5	NP-19	Merced Grove YNP-Mariposa County	6/12/33 to 10/14/33 5/26/34 to 10/16/34 6/30/35 to 10/31/35	578 921 1901
YNP-6	NP-20	Cascades-YNP Mariposa County	11/24/33 to 7/1/42 7/2/42 to 7/31/42	942 3805
YNP-7	NP-21	Wawona #3, Wawona Mariposa County	10/27/34 to 4/15/35 6/1/35 to 1/4/36 1/12/36 to 10/16/37 10/17/37 to 11/30/41	529 916 2548 487
YNP-8	NP-22	Middle Fork-YNP Tuolumne County	6/2/38 to 10/31/38 4/25/39 to 10/11/39 6/21/40 to 7/13/40 7/14/40 to 10/21/40 5/3/41 to 10/23/40	904 5434 916 5490 5494
YNP-9	NP-23	Tamarack Flat YNP-Mariposa County	6/2/39 to 10/14/39 6/26/40 to 7/9/40 7/10/40 to 10/23/40	911 2927 5491
YNP-10	NP-24	Empire Meadows YNP-Mariposa County	5/21/39 to 10/6/39 6/22/40 to 7/13/40 7/14/40 to 10/16/40	1912 1952 5494