

*What Was It Like?*

## Youth Job Bill Prompts Memories of the CCC

Of all New Deal ventures of the '30s, the one with perhaps the richest aura of successful achievement is the Civilian Conservation Corps.

President Kennedy's Youth Employment Bill, which has been passed by the Senate and is pending in the House Rules Committee, revives memories of the CCC, an experience that may soon be relived by thousands of young Americans.

The bill provides for establishment of a Youth Conservation Corps, which would provide jobs for school dropouts and young people who lack job skills, and thus

*Administration proposals for a Youth Conservation Corps are bringing back memories of the old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) of Depression days. Philip Weiner, a New York writer, recalls his days in the CCC, and remembers the moods and experiences of the corps at work in the Idaho forests.*



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can't find work. A major part of the program involves rehabilitation of forest and recreation areas. It's almost identical to the work performed by the CCC during the Depression.

**Sons of the Depression**

Youths joined the old Civilian Conservation Corps for many reasons—overwhelming financial need, or for “something to do,” or because of a restless desire for adventure and new experiences. They ranged in age from 18 to 25. They were the sons of the Depression, and for many the corps was their first opportunity for hope.

What was life like in the CCC? For me, induction came in 1939 at Fort Dix, N.J. I was 20 years old. Fort Dix was a horrible experience: Thousands of men in the most elementary kind of barracks. But soon we boarded a train for our work destination—the forests of Idaho.

From the train window we saw an America we had known before only by report. Place names and cities, rivers, and mountains became real and visible. There were endless miles of desolation, the omnipresent tumbleweed, miles of snow fences, isolated farm houses, and then the great Douglas firs, the cedars, hemlocks, and pines.

The train halted intermittently to debark groups of corpsmen who were replacements for those whose six-month enlistments had ended at camps along the way.

**In the Idaho Panhandle**

Our camp was F-188, Company 299, in the town of Emida in the St. Joe National Forest. It was an area of northern Idaho that had been ravaged by indiscriminate logging, fires, plant diseases, and neglect.

This is one of the lesser known national forest areas in the Idaho panhandle. To the north is the spectacularly beautiful Coer d'Alene lake area and then the Canadian border. To the west are the Palouse and Wenatchee wheat and apple regions, and to the east and southeast there is the wild Snake River Country.

The operations of the CCC in national forest areas were the dual responsibility of the Army, through its reserve component, and the United States Forest Service. The Army ran the camps, supervised barracks construction, issued the green uniforms, fed the enlistees, imposed quasi-military discipline, and generally operated the camps as it operated military posts. But there was absolutely no military training, in line with an injunction laid down in the formative days of the corps. There were, though, formation calls and flag salutes.

Work details were supervised by the Forest Service, which usually contracted with local people for on-the-job supervision. Our camp foremen were two old-time lumberjacks, both of whom were more agile, industrious, and conscientious than the men in the crew.

**Breakfast for an Outdoorsman**

A typical day began at six. Reveille bugle calls were supplemented by shrill whistle notes and radios turned up loudly. Breakfast was the big meal of the day: Cereal, pancakes, sausages, bacon, coffee, toast, and fruit juice, all at a cost of 40 cents per man.

After a period for cleaning up, trucks took our work details into the woods. There was instruction in use of the woodsman's tools—the double-bit ax, the peavey, and the crosscut saw. Few of us had ever seen these tools before, but within a week

The CCC in Idaho in Depression days: Will the corps live again?

or so almost all were adept in their use. We learned to handle the double-bit ax with confidence, and became part of a rhythmic team whipping the crosscut back and forth.

And within a month, we felt we had become lumberjacks, skilled at felling trees, using climbing spurs, and absorbing wood lore.

On the whole, work attitudes and motivation were much higher in the corps than in the more openly make-work alphabet agencies. We cut down dead trees, we built a ski lodge and a run for the University of Washington, and we hauled away the dead debris of the forest. Some of us took ranger station assignments. The stations, located in the foothills, served as central points from which we set out each day to string telephone wire for use during fire seasons.

**Educational Program Set Up**

There was more to CCC life than work in the woods and military-type discipline. An active educational program was available, and many of the boys resumed schooling they had dropped back home because of the necessity of earning a living. The University of Idaho offered extension and correspondence courses in forestry, mapping, and surveying.

As much as the lessons of forestry and conservation, the lesson of life in close quarters with men of diverse backgrounds was a new experience. Additionally, it gave an insight into the disciplines of military life, which came so shortly thereafter for many of us. Army terms such as “GI” and “gold brick” were part of the CCC language long before they became familiar and popular during the war.

From a money standpoint, the CCC was hardly conducive to saving. Since enlistment was predicated on the strained financial condition of the enlistee's family, a sum of \$22 was automatically allotted to the family each month, leaving the enlistee with only \$8 of his base pay. Through proficiency ratings, it was possible to earn from \$6 to \$16 over the base.

Many corpsmen stayed for a second six-month enlistment, but few remained after that. In my case I had taken a test for a civil service position sometime before my enlistment. While I was in Idaho, a job offer came from Washington, D.C.

This, combined with a sudden touch of homesickness, dissipated thoughts of a career in the woods. Since corpsmen were permitted to leave when they had a genuine job offer, I left and went to Washington.

The torpidity and heat of the nation's capital was in sharp contrast with the cool Idaho forests, which in their symmetry and breath-taking height symbolized the untouched grandeur of the American West as it was first seen by the mountain men.

But the transition back to Washington represented not only my own change. An era also was running down.

In 1940 the German armies were overrunning France. The Depression, the New Deal, and the moods and anxieties of the '30s faded almost unnoticed in the din of the desperate and intensive prepara-

tions for defense and war. The CCC was formally ended, surviving only as a paragraph or two in later histories and memoirs.

But in retrospect, the experience of the CCC takes on an ironic quality. My own warmest memories of those days are of the lonely and majestic timber giants of the mountains. And it had fallen to the children of the Depression, mostly from the cities and towns, to provide the saving energy to restore American's heritage of natural resources that had been nearly destroyed by the pioneers and settlers.

—PHILIP WEINER