



THE TREE ARMY

HOW THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION
CORPS CHANGED LANDSCAPES
AND LIVES

BY NIKI KOUROFSKY



PAGES 28-29: ROCK LAKE PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHNATHAN ESPER. HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS AND MURAL FROM ADIRONDACK EXPERIENCE

“YOU KNOW, IT’S KIND OF A BIG DEAL.”

A few years ago, my youngest daughter—around eight at the time—paused for about a nanosecond in her bouncing-off-the-walls excitement over an upcoming trip to deliver that earnest assessment of camping.

We’re not a family of hardcore backcountry adventurers, but a couple times each summer we’ll pitch a tent at a state campground and spend the weekend falling asleep to the chirrups of crickets and waking to the yodels of loons. Those public campgrounds are my daughter’s portal into the wilds, and her experiences there—running feral with her cousins, paddling a misty morning lake, catching an unexpected meteor shower—will inform her relationship with nature for the rest of her life.

The Adirondacks is rich in these wilderness gateways thanks, in part, to an initiative born of desperation: the Emergency Conservation Work Act, more commonly known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

The CCC began in 1933, when the Great Depression was at its bleakest, with unemployment hitting almost 25 percent and breadlines snaking through city streets. The program—shipping young, unemployed men to conservation jobs around the country—was a pet New Deal project of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had piloted a similar plan as governor of New York State. It was a bit of legislative poetry: citizens would help sustain the land, and the land would help sustain the citizens.

You can still see the program’s impact on the Adirondack Park 85 years later: Tall rows of pines north of Bolton Landing, or lining the trail to Rock Lake in the town of Indian Lake. Popular pathways like Minerva’s Roosevelt truck trail—a birder’s paradise—and sections of the Tongue Mountain Range loop, on Lake George, bordered by stonework walls. More than a dozen campgrounds—including Fish Creek, Golden Beach, Cranberry Lake and the Lake George Islands—developed or expanded by the corps. Even beautiful 300-acre Lake Durant was just another abandoned logging impound-

Left: Enrollees in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) at Speculator improved state campgrounds, broke miles of trails, and battled erosion and forest fires. Above: Hungry recruits gained more than 10 pounds, on average, during their first months of duty. Pages 28-29: CCC-era pines surround the trail to Rock Lake, relics from the camp that also created nearby Lake Durant.



ment speared by flood-drowned trees before Camp S-115 cleared the area and built a new dam.

With an established park system already in place, New York State was able to grow the nation’s largest Civilian Conservation Corps division, putting 220,000 men to work in 208 camps. Arietta was the first to be stationed in the Adirondacks, in May 1933; by the end of the effort, 25 more camps would help transform the park’s landscape. Crews battled and prevented forest fires, built dams and bridges, curbed invasive species, developed recreational access and planted millions of trees.

Prospects had to be veterans or single, young—18 to 25 years old—and eligible for government assistance. Enrollees, many transplanted from urban areas, signed on for six-month enlistments at a rate of \$30 a month, with the stipulation that \$25 be sent back home to help the folks. The state Conservation Department coordinated projects, but the Army ran the camps. At first, these were little more than tent colonies for a couple hundred men outfitted in hand-me-down uniforms from the Great War. Tools and supplies could be scarce.

Conservationist Clarence Petty worked in one of the earliest camps—Cross Clearing near Tupper Lake—as one of the Local Experienced Men (LEMs) hired to oversee newcomers to the wilderness. When he reported for duty, he was given about a dozen workers and zero tools. Petty trekked the five miles to his homestead in Coreys to grab an ax and saw to share among the men, who had been charged with bringing in



firewood for the rudimentary settlement.

Tents soon gave way to rows of barracks lined with cots, along with mess and recreation halls, libraries and infirmaries. The *Essex County Republican* declared that the Port Henry camp that opened in November of 1933 had “all the comforts of a modern hotel”—roomy, insulated quarters boasting “two big coal burners” each, and a bathhouse with “plenty of basins and mirrors.” Royce Pusey told the *Republican* that it was a world away from the North Hudson tent city he’d just transferred from. “No more sleepless nights during snow storms and winds,” he reported.

Even as the living became more comfortable, the labor remained backbreaking. In a 1997 retrospective for the *North Creek News*, Minerva recruit Jack Sheehan remembered his time at camp: “Every job was performed by manpower since there were few machines in those days. Men dug post-holes, and if they ran upon large rocks, they were hand drilled and dynamited. Then the fragments were also dug out by hand. The work day was from 8–5, one hour for lunch, and you gave your best effort every minute of the day.”

Those minutes added up. In October 1933, the North Hudson camp broke a state forestry record by planting 134,000 trees in one week. The green troops that Clarence Petty helped oversee at Cross Clearing cut 10,744 feet of trail in their first

month. After three years, the Bolton Landing boys had scoured 118,000 acres for gypsy moth egg clusters and had ripped out currant and gooseberry bushes—hosts that can carry blister rust from pine to pine—across 66,000 acres. Fish and game details throughout the park developed public fishing grounds along Fish Creek, and on the Oswegatchie, Boquet and Salmon Rivers. Others, dedicated to fire control, cut firebreaks, ran telephone lines to observer outposts and built 76 miles of truck trails through Forest Preserve.

When it came to firefighting, it was all hands on deck. In 1933 alone, hundreds of CCCers battled wildfires that destroyed more than 3,500 acres. And those flare-ups were dwarfed by Franklin County’s Great Bay Pond Forest Fire the following year, which kept men from five camps working in shifts for days to bring the blaze under control. The Paul Smiths camp logged 2,500 man-days fighting fire that year; the Lake Placid camp another 1,900.

The Civilian Conservation Corps was defunded in 1942, as attention and resources shifted to the war effort. By then, “Roosevelt’s Tree Army” had planted 220 million seedlings across the state (an estimated three billion nationwide) and sent millions of desperately needed dollars home to families. Add to that the boost to the local farms that supplied the camps, and the mom-and-pop enterprises enrollees visited on weekends. (Word is that Spanes, a bar near the Benson Mines camp,

did a particularly booming business.) At some locations, such as Newcomb and Minerva, civilians were able to pull in a paycheck or two, pitching in to build the camps for incoming corps.

And then there were the benefits to the men themselves. In *Adirondack Civilian Conservation Corps Camps: History, Memories & the Legacy of the CCC*, Martin Podskoch records the stories of more than a hundred enrollees. One was George Bowles, a 16-year-old who must have given a creative accounting of his age when he signed up in January 1939. He hired on in “an old pair of shoes that had cardboard in them because they had holes in the soles because our family was so poor.” But at the end of a freezing 130-mile trip from Watervliet to Blue Mountain Lake in the back of a canvas-covered truck, Bowles was issued new shoes, along with socks, long johns, coats, pants and shirts. “I had more clothes than I ever had,” he said.

Not everyone made it in from the cold. In a 1975 *Glens Falls Post-Star* article, Leroy Van Patten—who did a hitch at Bolton Landing—remembered lining up outside the infirmary with other hopefuls on a bitter day in 1937. At least, he wrote, the men who didn’t pass the physical were allowed to keep the overcoats, hats and gloves they had been given.

Top: Detail of the 1937 mural that decorated Speculator’s recreation hall, memorializing the camp’s work on a suspension bridge over the Sacandaga River. Inset: Enrollees at Schroon River and other early outfits slept, ate and recreated in tents. Facing page: The Speculator compound is the only CCC outpost still standing in the Adirondack Park; it now operates as a children’s camp.

All-you-can-eat meals were another perk, a novelty to many impoverished enrollees. George Bowles described his first meal at camp—chipped beef on toast and hot coffee—as “heaven.” An August 1933 *Adirondack Daily Enterprise* article reported that workers at the Paul Smiths camp had gained an average of 11 pounds each in just a few months.

Recruits also had access to medical and dental care, as well as classes in reading and writing, forestry, first aid, auto mechanics and more. But the most important thing they learned, according to 98-year-old George Jensen, of Chestertown, was how to work hard. “It was physical,” he said. “It made us very strong because we did all that manual, heavy work.”

The program gave (Continued on page 49)

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young men the space to be boys—Podskoch records short-sheeting, pillow fights, skinny dipping, battling for king of the hill—while shaping them into productive citizens and, in many cases, soldiers. Ninety-one-year-old Ned Ovitt, of Indian Lake, remembered the army trucks bringing crews to town on weekends for movies or baseball games—he joked that locals

BY THE END OF THE PROGRAM, "ROOSEVELT'S TREE ARMY" HAD PLANTED AN ESTIMATED THREE BILLION SEEDLINGS, SENT MILLIONS OF DESPERATELY NEEDED DOLLARS HOME TO FAMILIES, AND HELPED KEEP THE FARMS THAT SUPPLIED CCC CAMPS AFLOAT.

took their daughters indoors when the CCCers were around.

"It was a good program," Ovitt said. "It was good for the area. It was good for those boys. That was the idea."

"THIS IS SWELL!" Art Vogel, a transplant from Brooklyn to Arietta, gave that verdict on the CCC to the *New York Sun* in July 1933. Most Americans agreed, and still do, looking back through the red-white-and-blue haze of history. But there were a few wrinkles in the corps outfit.

Unions weren't very keen on the program—that is, until one of their own, Robert Fechner, was tapped to head it. And wilderness advocates took issue with the brand of conservation on offer, especially here in the Adirondacks, where philosophical arguments can take on the urgency of death matches. John Apperson, Robert Marshall and other giants of the local environmental scene questioned the wisdom and legality of work on protected Forest Preserve land. Recreational improvements, backcountry dams and truck trails—designed to allow access to firefighters and their equipment—all came under attack. Plowing wide paths

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through the wilds was of particular concern, advocates argued, as these byways could attract cigarette-wielding tourists, causing more forest fires than they helped control. The Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks and other organizations took their case to the state, but the Attorney General and a governor-appointed committee both agreed that the truck trail projects could continue.

The debate over truck trails was big and noisy, but the CCC brought some quieter threats to the environment.

ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCATES ARGUED THAT TRUCK TRAILS—DESIGNED TO ALLOW BACKCOUNTRY ACCESS TO FIREFIGHTERS—COULD ATTRACT CARELESS TOURISTS, CAUSING MORE FOREST FIRES THAN THEY HELPED TO CONTROL.

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the discriminatory policies and practices of a program nurtured under the promise of a greater good.

If needy families had daughters instead of sons, that \$25 monthly stipend the corps could provide was out of reach. The CCC had a “No Girls Allowed” policy throughout its existence, despite Eleanor Roosevelt’s advocacy for the inclusion of women.

Although African Americans were accepted—the legislation that created the Civilian Conservation Corps forbid discrimination based on “race, color, or creed”—recruitment percentages didn’t always fit the demographic landscape, especially in the South. Segregation was de facto at first, but then, citing the concerns of both administrators and communities, director Robert Fechner instituted a mandatory policy in July 1935. Fechner responded to criticism with this assurance: “I have personally visited many negro CCC companies and have talked with the enrollees and have never received one single complaint.”

There was one exception to blanket segregation—in the main, white men oversaw camps. Fechner defended that policy in a letter to a congressman, explaining that locals wouldn’t accept African-American crews unless there was “an assurance that white supervisors would be in charge.” According to Fechner, finding communities that would welcome African-American camps was a recurring problem; none were ever placed inside the Blue Line.

THE ADIRONDACK PARK was founded on a bold premise, that a balance can be struck between the needs of nature and the needs of mankind. It’s an ideal we’ve been struggling with ever since. But once, in a time of great misfortune, the entire country came close to fulfilling that promise.

The Civilian Conservation Corps—however imperfect—helped establish the value of conservation in the national consciousness. It was a tangible example that, yes, we can work together to care for the land, and that the land, in its turn, can give us hope.

It’s kind of a big deal. ▲

One was the use of pesticides to control the invasive gypsy moth population. In Adirondack Civilian Conservation Corps Camps, Bolton Landing enrollee Tony Satiroff explained the process: “In the winter I worked searching for egg clusters of the gypsy moths. We painted them with creosote.... In the summer we sprayed the infected trees with arsenic. Then when it rained the poison was washed into the brooks and wound up in Lake George.” An Adirondack Record-Elizabethtown Post article from 1938 tallied 3,500 acres statewide that were sprayed with arsenate of lead in the program’s first five years.

The northern rattlesnake population took a hit, too. Since Warren County had a bounty on the snakes, some enrollees added rattler wrangling as a side hustle. From June to September 1933, the Ticonderoga Sentinel reported that 25 skins had been turned in by workers at the Bolton Landing camp.

But species-undermining and water pollution weren’t the only skeletons in the CCC closet. Also problematic were

Photo of wedding rings compliments of Kathleen Keck Photography