



the

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America Works: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Illinois

After the stock market crashed in 1929, life changed. Banks closed. Businesses failed. There was no money, no work, and no hope. One of the first things President Franklin Delano Roosevelt did when he assumed office in 1933, was create a work program. It was part of his New Deal plan to revive America. The program was called the Civilian Conservation Corps, or “CCC” for short.

Fixing the Broken

The CCC hired World War I vets and young, unemployed, and often illiterate men to restore our country’s natural resources, which were devastated from over-farming, erosion, insect infestations, and dust storms. The broken men would fix the broken land. By doing so, the men would get job skills, pay, healthcare, and optional education. At some CCC camps, workers could take a variety of vocational or educational classes.

“Many enrollees were unable to sign their own name” when they entered the Corps, according to an article about an Illinois CCC camp on the U.S. Forest Service website. “The Company Commander stated that payroll would have to be signed with a

legal written signature. After this, it was easy to get the enrollees interested in learning to write.”

The program was often a lifesaver, says southern Illinoisan Kay Rippelmeyer, author of the books “Giant City State Park and the CCC” and “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Southern Illinois: 1933-1942.” She interviewed nearly 70 former CCC



In Cairo, Corps men filled sandbags for flood control. Photo courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

workers; some told her they lied about their age so they could join, she says. “For the vast majority, the CCC made their lives. It gave them a chance when nobody, nothing else was giving them a chance. For some, it was a matter of life and death. They weren’t eating at home before the CCC, or they were sharing clothes with siblings, stealing corn out of fields, picking up coal that fell from coal trains and selling it... There was real starvation going on. None that I talked to had ever been to a doctor or dentist prior to the CCC.”

Fixing Illinois

Civilian Conservation Corps camps were spread around the country. Numbers vary depending on the source, but Illinois had between 100 and 140, most of which were in southern Illinois for work on

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the Shawnee National Forest. Camps helped local economies, so “it was no surprise that politicians from both parties vied for (one),” writes Robert J. Moore in the winter, 2011 *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*.

According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources website, 165,300 Illinois men worked in the program. The CCC worked on three main targets in our state: forests, state parks, and farmland, though they also helped some historic sites. Workers planted trees, created or improved parks, turned the Illinois & Michigan Canal into a recreational area, landscaped, protected farmland soil, and much more. At times, they also helped with disaster relief; when the Ohio River flooded in Union County, workers sandbagged the levee, according to DNR. The Department estimates that, because of the CCC, the acreage of Illinois’ state parks and monuments increased more than five times between 1930 and 1940. “In Illinois alone, 60 million trees were



CCC workers playing craps during downtime. Photo courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

planted for erosion control and reforestation, nearly 400 bridges built, 1,192 miles of trails created, 4,742 flood control structures erected, and 223,800 erosion control devices installed,” according to DNR.

“All about the place, we found evidence of (CCC work),” wrote a columnist in Evanston’s March 26, 1936 *Daily Northwestern*. “The little broken down rustic dam... was gone, replaced by a gleaming white concrete affair... The hidden little roads that last year were hardly more than wheel ruts had been conserved into broad thoroughfares freshly surfaced. ”



Members of the CCC Co. 1658 at Camp Lincoln in Springfield. Photo courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

In a Fix

The work was often tough and the conditions could be too. The program was instituted so fast that the first workers lived in tents. Even the constructed lodging could be uncomfortable, says Rippelmeyer. “The barracks weren’t insulated at all, just heated by big, wood coal stoves. And it was hot in the summer.” Rural boys took to it the best. “Some of them told me they were used to working 12 to 14 hours, and now they only had to

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CCC camps built the Giant City State Park lodge in Makanda with Illinois hardwoods. Photo copyright IL. Department of Natural Resources.

work 8!” she says. But most city boys had not done any physical labor. Some quit.

It could be harder at remote camps, like certain ones in southern Illinois, where “if it rained you couldn’t get out for two weeks,” Rippelmeyer says. The worst leaders were often sent to these out-of-the-way locales. Some were “drunk” and dictatorial. There were bad apples among the workers, too. When conditions were bad, workers sometimes rioted or held “sit-down strikes.”

Yet, other camps were like hotels. Peoria County’s Camp Elmwood was a “showplace,” according to Moore’s article. It was in pristine condition with landscaping and tennis courts. At more basic, remote camps, workers could only play cards in their spare time, but at other locales they played tennis or base-

ball, saw movies, and visited local sites.

No Fix

At the beginning of the CCC program, whites and blacks were assigned to the same camp. But “the Southern states weren’t going to have integration,” Rippelmeyer says. So, whites went to one camp and blacks went to others. In Illinois, there were between 12 and 15 black camps, she says. One was in Pomona, in southern Jackson County, and several were in northern Illinois. In Pomona, the community came to accept the workers, who built trails and lookout towers, planted trees, and hung telephone lines, according to the Forest Service.

But when locals in Henry, Illinois learned that white CCC workers were being replaced by blacks

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in 1936, the camp closed, according to Moore's article. It was the same elsewhere. "In July 1934, some black CCC enrollees were sent to join Camp Randolph in Red Bud, Illinois but they were held on the depot platform and made to leave town on the



The lodge and cabins at White Pines Forest State Park in Mt. Morris were constructed by the CCC. Photo copyright IL Department of Natural Resources.

next train," Rippelmeyer writes in her book about the Corps in southern Illinois. The CCC fixed a lot of things, but not racism.

A Fixture

The start of World War II slowed the Corps. Some camps turned to war work. Others began to close. In 1942, the last shut down. "Many... were reoccupied by the armed services as training schools or were dismantled and reestablished on military bases," according to DNR.

But the CCC remained a fixture in the workers' minds and on American lands. Former enrollees held reunions. Rippelmeyer attended many and said some of the men were so happy to see each other again, they cried.

Their work is still evident in our state parks, historic sites, forests, and farmland. The CCC has been called the most successful works program in American history. One thing is certain. It changed the country's landscape, and some of the men, forever.



In Memoriam

On September 21, **Representative Esther Golar** died. A Chicago Democrat, she had represented the 6th District on Chicago's southwest side. She had served in the Illinois House since 2005.

Transitions

Senator Dan Kotowski is resigning his seat in October to head ChildServ, a nonprofit that helps family and children. He is a Democrat from Park Ridge. Kotowski has represented the 28th District in the Illinois Senate since 2007. **Laura Murphy** of Des Plaines has been named to Kotowski's seat.

Darin LaHood from Peoria has taken the place of former **Congressman Aaron Shock**, a Republican, in Washington. He represents the 18th District. LaHood, also a Republican, was elected in a special election in September. Shock resigned in March. **Chuck Weaver** of Peoria has been chosen as LaHood's replacement.

Governor Rauner appointed **John R. Baldwin** on August 14 to head the Department of Corrections. Prior to this, Baldwin was the director of the Iowa Department of Corrections.



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