



THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

A New Deal for Youth

Frederick K. Johnson

THE following article, a personal account by one who served in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first program intended to lift the country from the depths of the Great Depression, marks the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

I CANNOT tell the story of the Civilian Conservation Corps unless I touch briefly on the conditions that gave it birth and the environment from which I came. My parents were Swedish immigrants who arrived in this country looking only for a chance to better their lot. My father, Albin Johnson, was an unskilled laborer, lacking in education, but possessing a strong moral fiber interwoven with a strong belief in the work ethic and the sacredness of the family circle. He asked nothing of his adopted country but the chance to work for wages that would provide a better life than he had known.

Albin Johnson was born near Malmö, Sweden, in 1880. He arrived in America in 1904, settling in St. Paul where he found work laying tracks for streetcar lines. He

later moved to Clay Bank, a small settlement between Goodhue and Red Wing, where he worked as a clay digger to supply the Red Wing potteries. On September 6, 1906, he became a United States citizen.

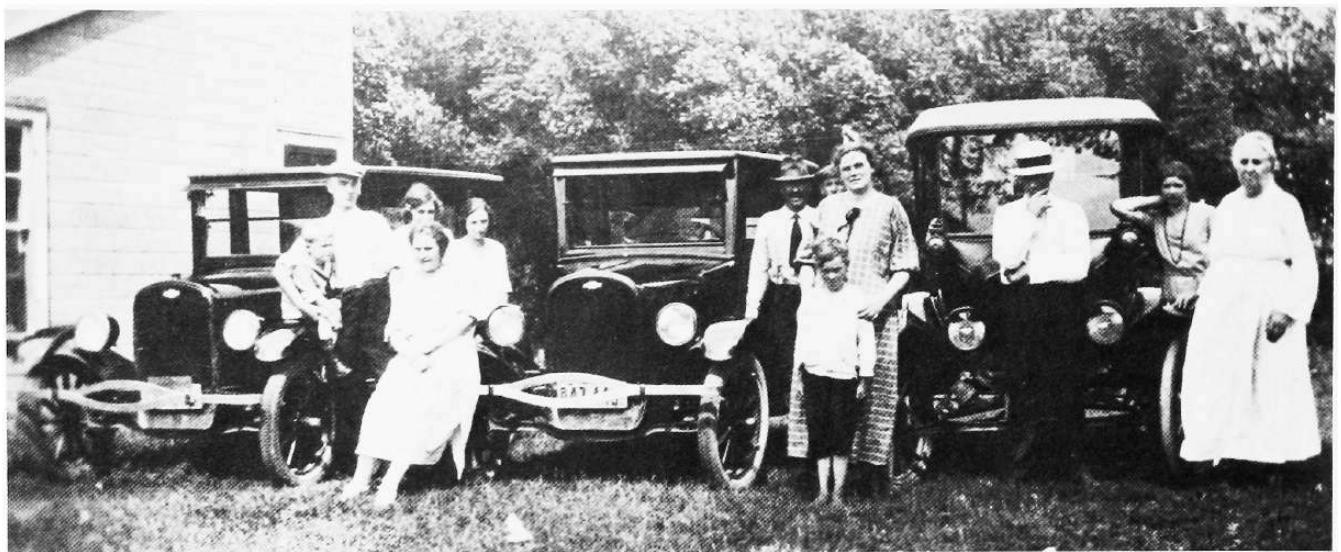
My mother, Amanda Carlson, who was born in Småland in 1884, emigrated in 1889 with her family to Red Wing where her father's brother lived. She became acquainted with my father during a train trip to Rochester, where she worked as a domestic, while he was returning to the pits at Clay Bank. They were married in 1905.

They set up housekeeping in a four-room frame house on property owned by the Red Wing Pottery. Clay digging by hand was grueling, low-paid work, and life was lonely for my mother who was accustomed to living in town. So they moved to St. Paul, where my father worked as a streetcar motorman for a few years. But big city life was evidently not to their liking after all, because they returned to Clay Bank where they resided until the clay deposits were exhausted. In a history that she wrote at age 96 my mother described Clay Bank about 1910: "I wasn't very happy living out there. I was lonesome as it was quite a change from living in Red Wing and I didn't know anyone. There were two camps where the men that worked in the Claypits lived and had their meals and there were many farms around us and other families moved in and built little homes and the men worked in the pits. My husband liked it and thought we should live there awhile and then maybe move to Red Wing. But then as we got acquainted with our neighbors we had many good times together."¹

In 1926 my parents moved from Clay Bank to Red

¹ A copy of Amanda Carlson Johnson's history is available at the Goodhue County Historical Museum, Red Wing. The author is grateful to Harold Becker, manager, and Dave Palmquist, naturalist, at Whitewater State Park for their cooperation and encouragement while this article was in preparation.

Frederick Johnson, retired after 45 years of service to Red Wing, was that community's street commissioner from 1955 to 1972 and city purchasing agent from 1972 to 1981. Among his published work is "The Dead Horse Cart and Other Wonders," which appeared in the July, 1980, issue of Public Works.



THE JOHNSON FAMILY gathered in Red Wing in 1923. Fred stands barefooted in front of his parents.

Wing and made a down payment on a small home. My mother served meals to boarders and my father found steady work, laboring, as opportunities arose, for the S. B. Foot Tanning Company, Durkee Atwood Rubber, Red Wing Sewer Pipe Company, and the Chicago Great Western Railway. The family enjoyed a modest prosperity. But then came the 1930s and financial disaster. I remember my father's constant search for work of any kind, for any wage, for any length of time. The name of the game was to hunt for a few dollars which could then be stretched to the limit. I recall his walking to a dairy farm about three miles from our home to put in a full day's work for which he received a one-dollar book of milk tickets.

My mother had a magical touch when it came to producing tasty meals on a limited income — she was an expert in the art of making do with what she had. In an economic condition that remains the yardstick upon which all other depressions are measured, my parents persevered. There were no fringe benefits or unemployment insurance to provide income. The situation was starkly simple: If you worked you got paid. No one even dreamed of the comprehensive welfare programs available today. The last desperate resort, all else failing, was to go on relief. This involved periodic trips to the local courthouse for handouts that would provide food and shelter on a short-term basis.²

My parents survived without help. They coped. Their pride would not allow them to suffer what they felt was the disgrace of failing to make it on their own. In retrospect, I cannot remember being cold or hungry, but life was basic, without frills or luxury. It was bearable because almost everyone was in the same boat. Ours was not an unusual case of deprivation; I tell of it only to place what follows in proper perspective, to pro-

vide a feeling for the time in which the events took place.

UPON taking office in 1933, President Roosevelt realized that the economic situation required action if the country were to survive. In sponsoring the CCC, he felt he had the opportunity to take care of two problems with one stroke. A man who loved the land, he had a deep concern for its preservation and improvement. The West had been laid waste by dust storms and drought, and other parts of the country had been plundered by those interested only in their own profits. In addition, there was a generation of young men who were mostly idle. Available jobs often went to the person with the most dependents, regardless of individual qualifications. By executive order signed on April 5, 1933, Roosevelt created the CCC to deal with the emergency. To work for the corps, men had to be unemployed, unmarried American citizens, between the ages of 18 and 23. (The age limitation was later raised to 25.) Enrollees enlisted for periods of six months and were required to allot \$25.00 of their \$30.00 monthly wage for the assistance of their families.³

²As the 1930s — and the Great Depression — wore on, Roosevelt's New Deal programs did provide alternatives to relief. Included in the flow of pump primers were such agencies as the Public Works Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and the National Recovery Administration.

³Normal re-enlistment dates were April 1 and October 1. Men entering the corps between those dates served until the next enrollment period offered the option of discharge or renewing for another six months. For more on the CCC, see Robert Goldston, *The Great Depression, The United States in the Thirties*, 97 (New York, 1968); Calvin W. Gower, "The CCC Indian Division: Aid for depressed Americans," in *Min-*

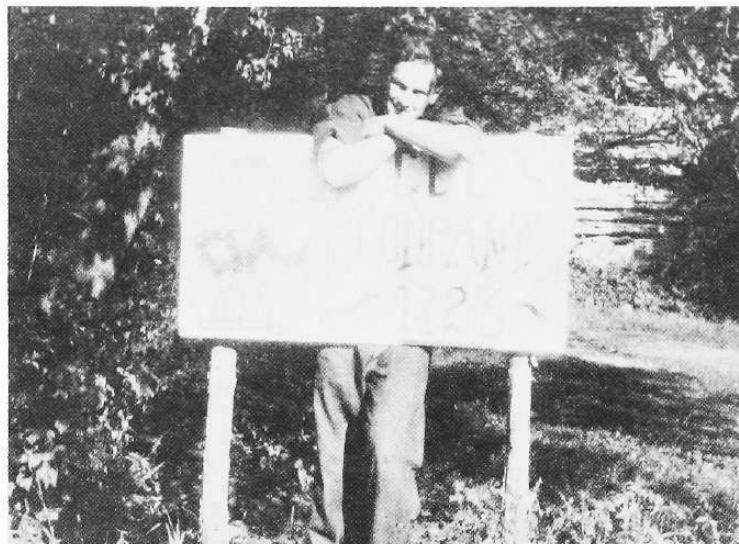
As an 18-year-old who met the basic requirements, I enrolled in the CCC on July 23, 1934. Along with a dozen others from Red Wing, I was transported to Fort Snelling for a week of induction and processing. At that time a good-sized garrison of the regular army was stationed at the post. Many were grizzled veterans of long service who did not hesitate to voice their displeasure with a system that paid soldiers \$21.00 per month as compared with the \$30.00 that we were to receive. All enrollees were given physical examinations in the time-tested military manner, along with shots in various parts of the anatomy. Any gaps in our schedules were filled with chores such as grass cutting and grounds policing under the resentful supervision of the military personnel. While there, we were joined by men from other parts of the state, bringing our group to the required company strength of 200.

I suppose I was a typical enrollee so far as background, education, and ability were concerned. Most of us had dropped out of high school before getting a diploma. Few of us had any experience related to the task ahead. No one expected to make the CCC a lifetime career. It was a chance to work, and we were grateful for the opportunity. So, marching to the drum beat of the Great Depression, we gathered at Fort Snelling — Finns and Slovaks from the iron range, Irish from St. Paul, Poles from northeast Minneapolis, Scandinavians and Germans from southern Minnesota. We were issued blue-denim work outfits, with a single set of surplus World War I woolens for dress. Some sizes were in short supply, so our company did not have a tailored look. In keeping with army philosophy, however, we did get well-fitted shoes. With a toilet kit for personal hygiene and a barracks bag to entangle our gear hopelessly, we were now equipped for the coming adventure.

Through the grapevine, we learned that our destination would be Whitewater State Park in southeastern Minnesota's Winona County. Located about seven miles north of St. Charles, Whitewater was named for the river that formed the valley and frames the park. It is a beautiful spot for the simple enjoyment of nature. When I first saw it, there were no facilities of any consequence, but nevertheless it was used extensively by fishermen, campers, and picnickers. The task for our group, now known as CCC Company 2709, was to improve and equip the park without detracting from the considerable natural beauty of the place.

Upon arrival on August 1, 1934, we found that new wooden barracks had been erected. We also learned, however, that CCC Company 1723 was already occupying them, and we were to be housed in six-man squad

nesota History, 43:3-5 (Spring, 1972); Robert M. Drake, "A Prideful Recollection of the Old CCC," in *Minnesota Volunteer*, July-August, 1983, p. 2-9.



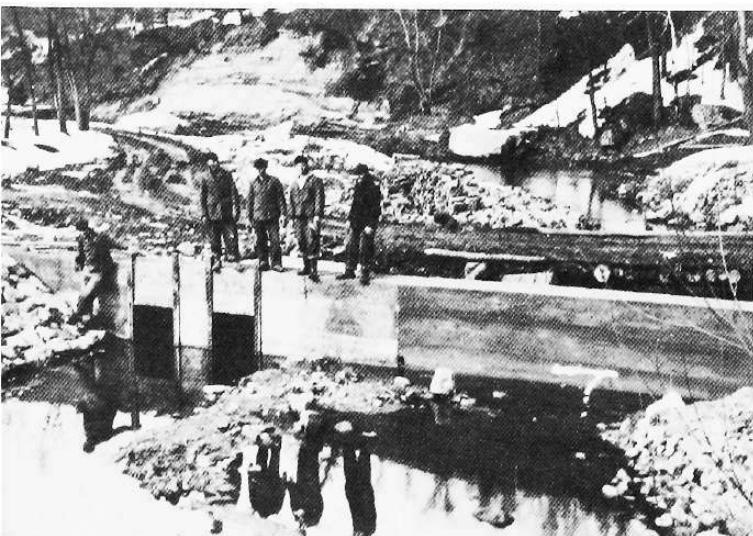
JOHNSON, in his early days at Whitewater, drapes himself over the sign of the company occupying the camp's only dry barracks.

tents in another area of the park. We spent about six weeks fighting mosquitoes and mud, eating in the open out of mess kits, afflicted with colds and other respiratory ailments brought on by the damp conditions. Company 1723 moved out and we thankfully took over their quarters. I remember the comparative luxury of the barracks: a wooden bunk with mattress pad instead of a cot, a roof that did not leak, a coal stove to ward off the chill, a screen door to keep out miscellaneous bugs and pests. Each of the ten barracks held from 20 to 25 men who slept in double-decked bunks around the perimeter of the common room. There was adequate space but very little privacy. Other buildings included a long mess hall with a T-shaped extension that housed the kitchen, a separate barracks for supervisory personnel, a tool house, blacksmith and repair shop, combined headquarters and supply building, latrine and shower room, a hospital staffed by an enrollee trained in first aid, and a recreation hall with a small canteen that stocked various items such as tobacco, candy, soft drinks, and toilet articles.

Two officers of the United States Army Reserve — a first lieutenant, with a second lieutenant as assistant — administered the camp. Experienced and qualified people hired by the Departments of Agriculture and Interior or the Forestry Service supervised the field work. Local Experienced Men (L.E.M.s) from the surrounding area were paid to share skills that the enrollees lacked. There was also an experienced cadre of men our age who had served well at other CCC camps and were promoted to provide us with field supervision. They were classified "Leaders" and drew pay at the rate of \$45.00 per month, while "Assistant Leaders" earned \$36.00.

The company was divided into groups with various assignments. My first task involved placing stone along the banks of the Whitewater River to control erosion. Any native of that area is well aware that the Whitewater can turn from a gently rippling stream to a raging torrent in a few hours when fed by the watershed from the surrounding bluffs. (The frequent closings of Highway 74 from Weaver to Elba to this day are caused by the Whitewater River on the rampage.) Consequently, much of our effort was dedicated to controlling what is both the bane and blessing of the park. We created a diversion channel for the stream and built a dam, thus providing a ponded area for swimming — after we

CCC'ers perched on the dam they were building to create a swimming area and beach along the Whitewater River, 1935; pictured below are the author (lower left) and the crew that built Whitewater's septic tank system.



hauled in sand for a beach. We spanned the river with pedestrian bridges leading to hikers' trails that wound up to scenic overlooks. Other workers quarried stone from a location within the park limits to provide the material for a caretaker's house and restroom, as well as erosion-control activity. A concrete septic tank with drainage field was constructed to provide sorely needed sanitary facilities.

Our work, in modern terminology, was very labor intensive. Except for a fleet of dump trucks, the projects were completed with hand tools wielded by young muscles. As one might expect in any group thrown together at random, there were a few shirkers — goldbrickers, in the vernacular of the time. I think that the average enrollee was a productive individual with an interest in what he was doing and an inner appreciation of his contribution to the total project.

To a great extent, our life was regimented. We accepted this fact with the realization that it was not the place or time for individuality. The following schedule recaptures a typical day of my life in the CCC:

6:30 A.M.

Wake up, perform usual morning ablutions, make bed, and clean the barracks. Each man was responsible for his own area, and the broom moved from one to another as the debris was swept rearward to a trash container. The cans mounted on the building's center supports to serve as cigarette butt containers had to be emptied each day. While we were in the field, barracks were inspected by one of our officers to insure a sanitary living condition.

7:15 A.M.

Breakfast. The mess hall contained about 20 wooden tables, each providing seating for ten men eating family style. To allow an equal opportunity for each to have at the food, we were required to stand in place until the mess sergeant yelled "Seats," which was the signal to dive in. Our food could never be considered gourmet dining. In fact, for most of us it was a far cry from home cooking; however, it was plentiful, filling, and offered in fairly good variety. We grumbled a bit, but with the healthy appetite of the young, we filled and cleaned our plates with such enthusiasm that most of us gained weight. A typical breakfast would always include coffee, milk, fruit or juice, and one of the following as a main course: dry or hot cereal and toast; pancakes and bacon; scrambled eggs (I never saw a whole egg in a CCC mess hall); or toast covered by a mysterious meat mixture that inspired rather profane names and much speculation as to its content. I hope the recipe for pancakes has been forever lost. I still get a heavy feeling in my midsection when I think of them. Yet when the problems of cooking and serving in quantity are considered, the food was

quite good. Certainly a lot better than in some of the restaurants that I have visited since.

7:45 A.M.

Roll Call. Everyone who was assigned to field work reported to the tool shed to be counted and to check out a pick, shovel, ax, rake, or whatever tool was needed for the day. If too sick to work, you reported to the camp hospital for examination. A higher-than-normal temperature meant automatic admission followed by aspirin dosage and bed rest until the condition passed. The attendant would also treat and bandage minor cuts and abrasions. If an ailment required more than elementary first aid, a doctor was on call and responded quickly to emergencies. The hospital contained four army cots that were empty most of the time. I thought the first-aid attendant had the best job in camp. Others were assigned to duties such as kitchen police (KP), latrine orderly, night fireman, canteen clerk, or other support jobs. The rest of us walked to our assigned project carrying our tool for the day.

12:00 M.

Dinner. Back in camp a substantial meal awaited us, usually including meat, potatoes, vegetable, bread, dessert, and coffee. We did not know about the modern custom of midmorning and midafternoon coffee breaks and suffered not by their omission.

1:00 P.M.

Back to work.

4:45 P.M.

Return to camp, check in tools, and clean up for the evening meal.

5:30 P.M.

Supper. The menu was very similar to dinner, occasionally varied by one-dish meals such as soup or stew.

6:00 P.M.

Free time. By today's standards, our recreational opportunities were very limited. The rec hall contained a pool table with a long waiting line, a few books and magazines. We had no radio, and TV was still a dream. Every barracks had its penny-ante poker game for payday stakes — one-cent ante, two-cent limit on bets, one player designated as bookkeeper responsible for collection and payment on the first of each month. Whist and cribbage were very popular. We also engaged in long philosophical discussions about such profound topics as politics, religion, and girls. If one had the money and a ride to town, there was no liberty restriction other than the need to be on hand for the morning roll call. Officially, enrollees were not permitted to have cars. Actually, the surrounding woods sheltered several cars of ancient vintage that were owned corporately or individually by

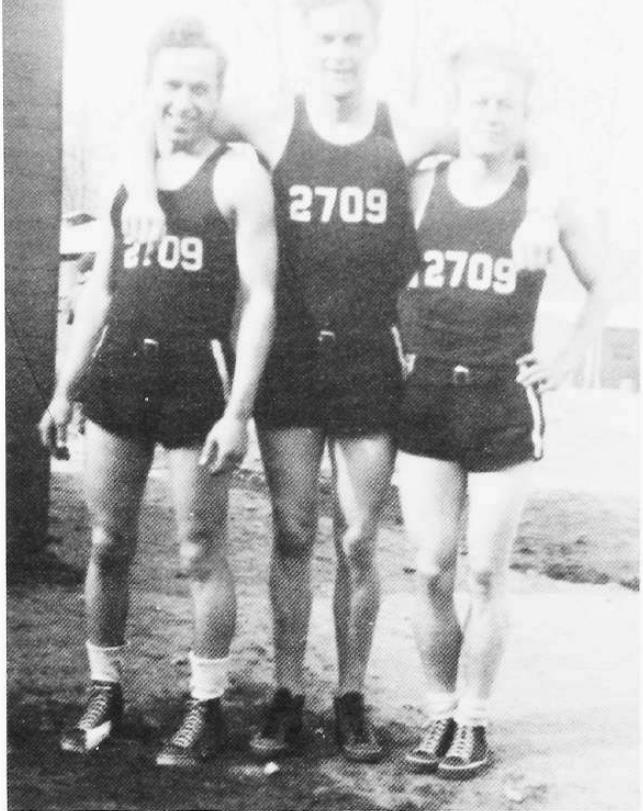


CCC buddies in their natty winter garb took a break to pose with their handiwork, 1935.

men who charged their buddies moderate amounts for transportation.

The nearest town of any size was St. Charles, a community of some 1,200 souls, about seven miles south from our camp. It had little to offer so far as recreation was concerned; however, it was a change from the camp environment. One could have a hamburger, beer, and a chance to whistle at the local girls. Lacking transportation, energetic seekers of bright lights could take a seven-mile round-trip walk in the other direction to Elba, a hamlet boasting a bar and grocery among its few business establishments.

Some of us who were athletically inclined spent a lot of time playing or practicing for the camp's touch football and basketball teams. Our basketball shorts and shirts were new outfits purchased from canteen profits, and our sweatshirts consisted of long woolen underwear tops dyed gold to match the rest. We scrimmaged against area high-school teams and had regulation games with other camp squads. An annual state tournament was held to determine the top team of the 74 camps in Minnesota. I remember with chills a ride in the back of a canvas-covered truck to the iron range city of Virginia to participate in a state tournament, only to lose in the first round. (I will always believe that our defeat was caused by the 300-mile trip in the cold. We never got warmed up.) We also played the Transient Camp located near the neighboring village of Altura. Transient camps, another



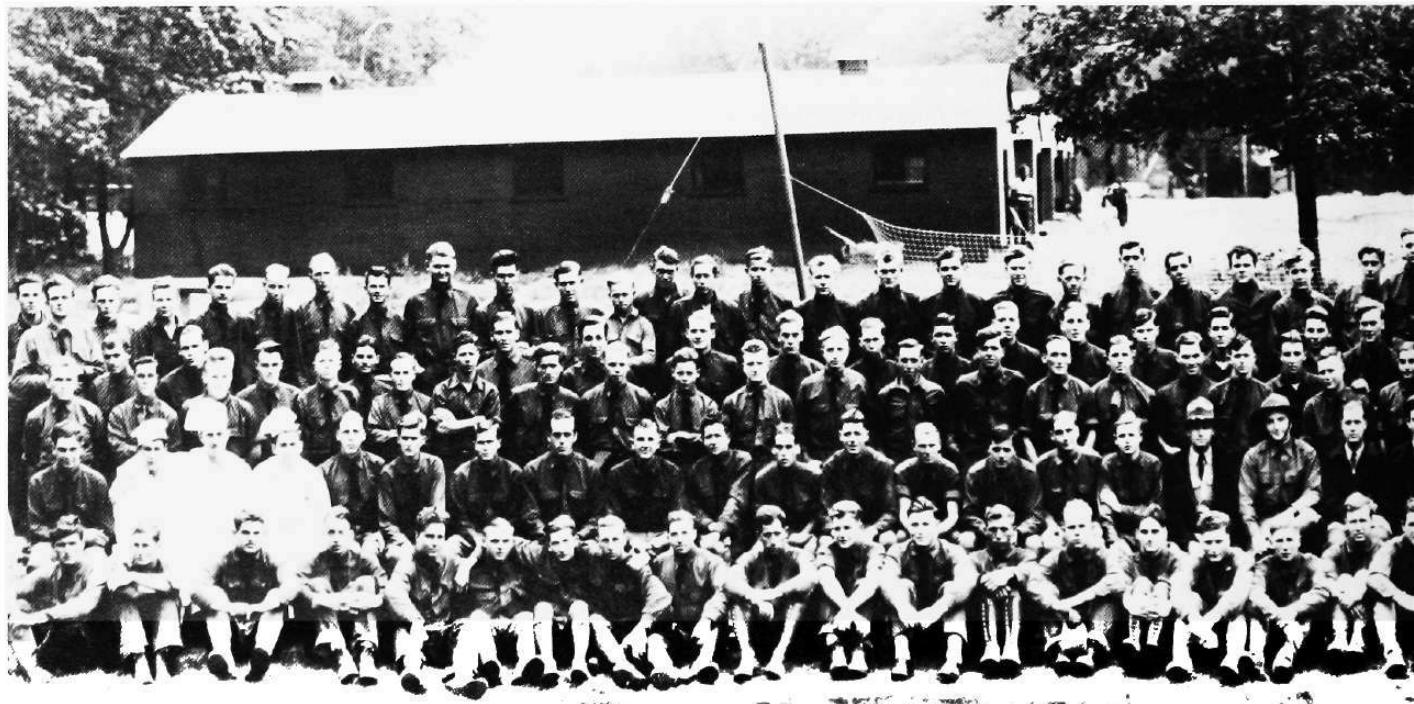
HEAD and shoulders above the rest, Johnson relaxes with teammates Joe Lewis (left) and Carl Lund in 1935.

program of the depression, were established for older, unemployed, and homeless men who were wandering around the country in need of food and shelter on a temporary basis. In effect, they were "Hobo Jungles"

with roofs and walls. The Altura basketball team was big and awkward, the rec hall court very small with a low ceiling. Points could only be scored by layups or rebounds resulting from line-drive long shots. The players were not intentionally rough, but their game plan made basketball a contact sport if there ever was one, and while we scored the most points, we also had more bruises and contusions.

Other CCC camps offered more elaborate recreational programs, including some educational opportunities. At Whitewater Park, Protestant and Catholic services were held in the rec hall on Sunday mornings. Our only exposure to culture or education came in the form of debate teams which traveled from Saint Mary's College in Winona to try out their arguments before a live audience. They also came to enjoy our food, which they claimed was far superior to that offered in their cafeteria. Looking back, I cannot remember a time when I felt bored. I suppose my least-liked leisure activity was doing laundry. For this purpose, we were furnished blocks of yellow soap that would remove the most stubborn dirt along with a bit of skin from the user's hands.

In October, 1935, the entire company moved northwest to the nearby town of Plainview, to the southern edge of the city limits, within easy walking distance of the downtown area. Here the routine was much the same as in Whitewater Park. Our field activities consisted of erosion control, tree planting, and woodlot management. I remember with some nostalgia crisp winter days in the woods, swinging an ax or pulling one end of a two-man saw, dropping dead or diseased trees



into the powdery snow, burning the brush, and saving the larger limbs for the farmer who owned the property. Since we were a considerable distance from the barracks, we were provided with a brown-bag lunch. At noon we would gather around roaring fires, extending our cold meat sandwiches on sticks to the flames for toasting, drinking steaming field-brewed coffee from metal canteen cups, topping it all off with a hand-rolled cigarette. (The so-called tailor-made cigarettes, at 15 cents per pack, were usually seen only on payday.) As a rule, if the morning temperature was -10° or lower, we were allowed to remain in the barracks for the day. In the winter of 1935-36 there were many such mornings. Those were days to catch up on our reading and card playing, keeping our coal stoves going and our quarters clean.

In retrospect, I would say that morale was never a big problem. In the first days of the CCC experience, I think a tinge of homesickness was common among us. For most it was the first time away from home. I believe, however, that the natural exuberance and high spirits of men of our age prevented any long-lived depression. The CCC life, though spartan, was better than most were used to. There was a lot of good-natured horseplay that did no harm. Short-sheeting caused many a man to struggle into his bunk at night. Occasionally a rookie would join us who had not heard of the ancient sport of snipe hunting. This involved escorting the innocent victim into the woods at night equipped with a candle and

sack to wait for a nonexistent snipe to fly past the lit candle into the bag. After considerable time spent in his fruitless vigil, the hunter would realize that he had been had and would slink back to the barracks to face the jeers of his new comrades.

We had disagreements, but few resulted in blows. Around payday, some would go to town for a few beers — 5 cents a glass or 50 cents for a large pitcher. Some men became noisy and boisterous, but I cannot remember a single member of our company being arrested for disturbing the peace. Neither were we rebels. The most daring action I remember was the entire company refusing to answer work call when for some reason the meals were unusually bad for two days. A shake-up in the kitchen staff resolved the problem without serious disruption in our routine. I realize now, considering our age, we were a pretty well-disciplined group.

As my re-enlistment option date of March 31, 1936, neared I found myself with mixed emotions. The economy was better, but jobs were still scarce. Although some of my friends had left the corps, I still had many good buddies remaining. I felt, however, that it was time to look for something better. So I left the security of the corps to search for work in the outside world. I felt that my service enabled me to grow, both physically and mentally. I acquired a basic knowledge of construction procedures that have stood me in good stead. In return, I had a part in making the places in which I served a little better.

CIVILIAN Conservation Corps Company 2709 early in its stay at Whitewater State Park, September, 1934



AS AN INDIVIDUAL who was directly involved in the corps, I can only try to be objective in describing the broader impact and effects of this peacetime army. Born in a time that required desperate measures, the CCC was the first, and perhaps the most successful, social program ever to come from the nation's capital. But its establishment and early growth were subjects of considerable controversy. Critics maintained it was intended to be a paramilitary force created to cope with the growing tension in Europe. Some said it was another Hitler Youth Corps.⁴ Except for the presence of two uniformed officers, there was no hint of military training involved in our camp life. I will admit, however, that when I went into the army some nine years later, my CCC experience made the transition from civilian life much easier to handle.

There was also considerable apprehension and some resistance in the communities selected as sites for CCC camps. People feared for their property, peace, and the safety of their daughters under the threat of invasion by 200 young strangers. Time proved they had little to fear; except for isolated instances, the CCC men caused little trouble. Establishment of a camp provided an economic boost: enrollees spent their money in the host communities; local vendors furnished the camps with supplies; local labor was involved in camp construction; and some of these workers stayed on as L.E.M.s. Sentiment changed from wariness to welcome. In fact, many congressmen fought to have camps based in their districts and vigorously protested closings when work was completed. The CCC program peaked in August, 1935, when there were 2,652 camps scattered across the country with 505,782 enrolled men. California led the nation with 155 camps, Delaware was last with 3, and Minnesota ranked ninth with 74.⁵

From that high point, the program slowly declined until it was terminated in June, 1942. There was still much to be done, but World War II turned men from the task of conservation to destruction. In the nine years of its existence the CCC placed an indelible mark on the American landscape. In recent visits to Whitewater State Park, I was happy to see people swimming in the lake we created, climbing the trails we cleared and leveled, using the buildings we erected, and finding the trees we planted standing tall and healthy. In other parts of the country the CCC worked in national, state, and

local parks building bridges, shelters, towers, cabins, sewage systems, foot and horse trails, erosion-check dams, picnic grounds, custodian and concession buildings, and road systems. Corpsmen planted trees, fought forest fires, and battled tree parasites and insects. They assisted the public during weather emergencies caused by hurricanes in the South and blizzards in the North. In short, they served the cause for which the corps was created: the conservation of the country and its resources.

I think some comment on the human impact of the CCC is also in order, and, again, I strive here for objectivity. I believe that its intangible effect on the youth of the depression generation is harder to evaluate than the visible results of their work. One can only speculate what would have happened to thousands of young men who without the CCC would have spent their early productive years in enforced idleness. The corps was not a handout; it was a fair exchange. At a time when it was desperately needed, we were offered the opportunity to work for the preservation and improvement of America, and while the pay was not high by today's standards, the greater reward came in the elevation of the human condition. The CCC member felt good about himself and what he was doing. In those difficult days, that was enough. In summary, I believe, measured upon any yardstick, the Civilian Conservation Corps was a successful program, and the country and its people are better because it existed.⁶

⁴See, for example, Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval: The Age of Roosevelt*, 199 (New York, 1960).

⁵Here and below, see John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study*, 84, 208 (Durham, N.C., 1967).

⁶It appears that history may repeat itself. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 2, 1983, p. 1, reported that "The House, resurrecting a New Deal idea of a half-century ago, approved an American Conservation Corps program . . . to provide as many as 100,000 park and forest jobs for youths. The bill . . . calls for \$60 million this year and \$300 million for each of the next five years in a program fashioned after the Civilian Conservation Corps that Congress approved early in Franklin Roosevelt's first term as president."

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