



A FOREST ARMY GOES TO WORK

It was October of 1929. The **stock market** had crashed. The United States entered what is known as the “Great Depression.” Many persons lost their entire life’s savings either through the collapse of the banks or the stock market. At that time bank deposits were not insured as they are today. Eventually some banks paid their depositors back for the money they lost at a very reduced rate. Joseph King of Morrisville, Vermont, remembers those times.

All the banks closed. If you had a thousand dollars or five thousand [dollars] in the bank, you couldn’t get a nickel and it ran along about three years before they paid any of it and I think it was eleven cents on the dollar after three years so you really lost money on that deal.*

Unemployment skyrocketed. Owners of many large western farms found that they could not afford to harvest their crops. Produce was left to rot in the fields. Some farmers burned the grain they raised because they could not afford to buy fuel. People were hungry everywhere. Soup lines were a common sight in most cities. A Vermonter living in Burlington recalls those lines of people.

I was working in Burlington at the time of the Depression and what I remember most was the soup line that they had. They were lined way up on the street for just a bowl of soup. I remember

that very well. I was one of the **fortunate** ones. I wasn’t one of them. But I think now that we have so much, and to think of those days and the soup was watered, so they told me. But then, that was a little nourishment.*

So you see, Vermont was not unaffected by the depression. However, on the whole it did better than much of the country. Many Vermonters owned small farms and were able to get by when city people could not. A garden, a cow, some chickens and a wood lot kept the average Vermonter fed as well as warm.

Things were not improving. Something had to be done and something was. Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President. During his first 100 days in office he took action to have laws passed to help relieve unemployment as well as to benefit our nation. This legislation, known as the New Deal, created many programs among which were Social Security, insurance for bank deposits, assistance to farmers, and public work projects.

On March 31, 1933, President Roosevelt signed the Emergency Conservation Act which **authorized** the formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). This program put unemployed men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three to work on projects in the nation’s forests and rural areas. For almost ten years, two million enrollees were employed nationwide developing parks, improving forests, building flood control dams and bridges, and

*Excerpts from *Shunpike Folk*, pp. 49 and 50.



controlling **erosion** and insect pests.

The CCC was jointly administered by the Labor Department, the Army and the National Park Service, each being responsible for different **aspects** of the program. The Labor Department helped select potential corps workers. Transportation, food, uniforms, recreational, and medical facilities were provided by the Army. The National Park Service developed and **supervised** the work projects.

The impact the CCC had on the economy was immediate. Thousands of men left the cities to work in camps across the country. Between 1933 and 1942, when the program ended, 40,868 men went to work in Vermont CCC camps. Of this number, 11,243 were Vermonters.

One of our country's great peacetime successes, the CCC benefited our lands as well as our people. Men from all different backgrounds and many different parts of America left their homes to perform useful **conservation** work. But just as important as the work they did to benefit our resources were the benefits the enrollees themselves received. Not only did they have jobs in a time when jobs were scarce, but many learned to read and write in the Corps. Practical skills that would be useful for the rest of their lives were also developed. They learned to work and live with people different from themselves. Manuel Gomez of Montpelier, Vermont, worked in one of the camps. He describes his



memories.

We lived with boys from farms, cities and small towns; every nationality and most religious denominations were represented in our camp. Regardless of what nationality or religion we professed to have, basically we had all the virtues and shortcomings. We had blacks in our camp - this was before integration was accepted in our country. I got to know these boys in work and play and realized that discrimination had no place in our world. Taking a look at the world today, we certainly got along much better than in the problems of living and working together.**

Enrollees of the CCC were paid one dollar a day for their work. This might seem like very little for a day which began at 5:30 A.M. However, during the depression it was quite a lot. Of the \$30.00 they earned each month, workers were required to send \$25.00 of their pay home to their families, leaving them with only \$5.00 a month for themselves. Being able to send money home to their very needy families gave the CCC enrollee a sense of pride.

The Vermont CCC accomplished a great deal. They built 105 miles of road and 197 bridges, planted 1,122,000 trees, cleared 1,030,624 acres of insect pests, and developed many of the parks and

**Excerpt from Perry Merrill's *Roosevelt's Forest Army*, p. 56.

ski areas that we enjoy in Vermont today. In fact, until the CCC came along there were only two state owned picnic/park areas in the whole state. Today, thirty of our many park and forest areas were ones that were either developed or improved by the CCC.

Effects of those nine years of Civilian Conservation Corps work are still with us today. Not only do we use the roads, bridges and parks that were created, but we are visited yearly by the families of old CCC enrollees from all over the United States who fell in love with Vermont while working here in the 1930's and early 40's.

VOCABULARY

stock market - the market for buying stocks and bonds

fortunate - lucky

authorize - give permission

erosion - the wearing away of earth and rock by wind and water

aspect - characteristic

supervise - manage

conservation - to protect from loss or damage