The Effectiveness of the Civil Conservation Corps as Part of the New Deal

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A brief investigation of the effectiveness of the Civil Conservation Corps as part of the New Deal.

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By 1932, the Great Depression had wreaked havoc on America. Only twenty-five percent of men aged fifteen through twenty-four were employed with full time jobs, and another twenty-nine percent held part time occupations. A large number of Americaâ s youth lived as tramps, traveling town to town in search of work (Salmond, 1967). America had exhausted much of its timber supply, wasted through the 1920s when natural resources, work, and money were plentiful. The American people had nowhere to go, nothing to do, and hopes for a better future seemed all but impossible. America needed a way out, and in April of 1933, legislation was passed to provide funding to the Civil Conservation Corps (CCC) (History Channel Website, 2012). The positive effects of the CCC were both far reaching and fast acting in helping pull America out of the Depression.

In the depth of the Depression, much of Americaâ s youth lived at or under the poverty line. Often times, families had no reliable source of income. The breadwinners of the house had lost their jobs, and the search for employment seemed futile. Yet the young men of the country were not the only ones wasting away. The wasteful actions of the 1920s had torn apart the natural beauty of the nationâ s forests, and whipped out nearly ninety percent of the nationâ s timber supply. Where there was once some eight-hundred million acres of forest in the continental United States, now stood only one-hundred million acres of virgin timber (Salmond, 1967). The CCC was opened in 1933, the pit of the Depression, to men between ages eighteen and twenty-six. Men needed to be between five and six and one half feet tall, weigh at least one hundred and seven pounds, and, as Rosentreter described, â at least three serviceable, natural masticating teeth above and below." CCC records claimed that the average enrollee was from a family of six children, and both he and his father were unemployed. Enrollees would volunteer for periods of six months, and many chose to reenlist after their first term. Men were paid a salary of thirty dollars a month, and it was mandatory that twenty-five dollars were sent home to support their families. In some cases, this money was not close to the amount the family would require to live comfortably, but it was the start of a better life (Salmond, 1967).

Upon beginning work in one of the thirteen hundred CCC camps across the continental United States, men were issued a blue denim suit for daily work use, and an olive colored army uniform left over from World War I for dress purposes. He also received basic necessities, such as shoes, toiletries, and bedding supplies (Rosentreter, 2012). A typical day in the CCC began with an army like wakeup call at six, with men being clean and ready for physical training by six-thirty. Each day men were fed three hearty meals, a breakfast lunch and dinner. After breakfast, men would head out for work. Projects such as constructing trails, bridges, dams and the like; or planting trees, working on soil conservation projects, and rescuing wildlife were assigned to camps by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior. After a hard days work, men could enrich their camp experience by bettering their education with camp teachers, reading books at the library, or playing sports in the yard with their peers (Salmond, 1967). In 1937, camps began to enrollees to spend at least ten hours of their recreational time per week enlisted in academic or vocational training classes. The CCC had taken in approximately three million unemployed men who were in many cases malnourished, uneducated, and set on a path of uncertainty; and turned their lives around with quality work, food, and education.

At home, families of the men employed by the CCC were receiving twenty-five dollars a month, which they could use to pay off debt, buy food and clothing, and depending on their situation, possibly put toward a type of vacation. Both small towns and families began to experience relief from the depression, as where ever there was a CCC camp, there was also a boost to the local economy. It was estimated that each camp spent an average of five thousand dollars a month in food and supplies for the men. The economic stimulus on the local level began the push to a healthy economy.

Nicknamed â Rooseveltâ s Tree Armyâ by the New Republic in 1935, the CCC had set to work preparing the wilderness frontier for American enjoyment. In Michigan alone, fifty-seven of the camps opened annually to plant a total of four hundred and eighty-four million trees, release one hundred fifty-six million fish, and construct seven thousand miles of truck trails, five-hundred and four bridges and two-hundred and twenty-two buildings. Partnered with Michigan State University, the CCC helped teach local farmers how to properly thin wooded areas near their homes. Camps in Northern Michigan saved the National Park on Isle Royale by working long hours, in day and night shifts to fight the forest fire that threatened to burn the island to a crisp (Rosentreter, 2012). Every step in nursing nature back to health taken by the CCC was another step closer to reopening the gates to the outdoors to the American public across the United States.

While both the nationâ s forests and prairies were receiving help form the conservation programs, the program also helped reduce the crime rate in cities and urban areas. Prohibition had not reached its goal of taking alcohol out of the hands of abusive men, but had only pumped money into the business of organized crime. Men who were unemployed with nothing to do and nowhere to be were likely to turn to crime, and possibly join the gangs and bootleggers who controlled the streets with money earned from lawless transactions. The murder rate had reached a new high, peaking in 1933 with a rate of nine point seven murders per one-hundred thousand people (Crime and Justice Atlas, 2000). Honest people would often fall victim to mischievous pranks performed by youngsters out of mere boredom. While many believed America had hit rock bottom, the public still feared things could, and would, get much worse if someone did not intervene. The Presidentâ s CCC was quite possibly the out American boys needed, with a promised income and the lure of an epic adventure.

Polls claimed that in July of 1936, the CCC was supported by eighty-two percent of the American public, and Rexford Tugwell of The Democratic Press claimed the CCC was â too popular for criticismâ . However, the program still encountered minor yet unavoidable opposition. Men with young daughters who resided in towns near the camps often showed a strong dislike for the CCC, a program which had stocked their community with hundreds of young men who could possibly pose as dangerous dates for their innocent and naïve daughters. Many camps held scheduled dances, allowing the boys to socialize with young ladies of the town. The Womenâ s Temperance Union approved of the camps for the most part, but did not approve of alcoholic beverages such as beer being available for consumption at the camps (Salmond, 1967). In the end, it was Congress who put an end to the CCC in 1942, by redirecting the money used to fund the program into funding for World War II efforts.

Though it was only active for nine years, just short of a decade, the positive effect the CCC had will never be forgotten. Thousands of families across the country look back on the CCC as one of the first steps taken to help lift the country out of the recession. The CCC has left a long lasting legacy, in the forests, trails, and national parks it has left behind. Today, many vacationing Americans still encounter and admire work done by the CCC. In the cities, the murder rate fell throughout the course of the CCC and continued to fall until the 1960s (Crime and Justice Atlas, 2000). The program has served as a model for conservation programs today, including the Student Conservation Association (SCA) and the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) (Service, 2012). The Civil Conservation Corps played its part, along with other important programs of The New Deal, in pulling America out of the trenches of the recession, by conserving its most valuable resource, its people.

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