



75 Years Later: the Legacy of the



FORCE for **Nature**

by Craig Thompson
DEC file photos

CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

In fall 2002, I arranged to meet Albert Lanoue, a former Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollee to talk about his experiences in Company 270.

"After camp mess, I'd drive the company's garbage truck to the dump," he recalled. "I'd pull in, turn around...and my wheels wouldn't stop turning before people would start jumping on the truck, grappling amongst each other for table scraps. Times were tough."

Lanoue managed the fleet at Camp S-72 in Delmar from 1933-36, at what is now DEC's Five Rivers Environmental Education Center. The first thing he said was, "I thought you all had forgotten about us." I was embarrassed to acknowledge that, indeed, we had.

The Great Depression was about much more than economic chaos caused by widespread unemployment and the bankruptcy of our nation's financial institutions. It was a time of national environmental crisis as

well. Forest fires were frequent and often severe, and fire-fighting capability was limited. Forest pests and diseases were out of control. Imprudent plowing of grasslands, over-grazing of public lands, over-cutting of forest lands, and soil exhaustion had led to severe erosion and stream siltation throughout the U.S. Fish and wildlife stocks were in decline. Many areas were ravaged by severe flooding. And the increasing availability of automobiles put tremendous pressure on already over-burdened parks and fish and wildlife resources, creating demand for even more access and opportunity, and at more remote destinations.

To combat both economic and environmental crises, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Emergency Conservation Work Act on March 31, 1933, creating a Civilian Conservation Corps. It was a vision Roosevelt had already tested during his tenure as gover-

nor of New York. During a span of three years, his Temporary Emergency Relief Administration put thousands of unemployed New Yorkers to work on a \$19-million bond act program to reforest one million acres of land. The concept worked well in New York, and then-Governor Roosevelt used this pet project to great advantage in his successful presidential campaign. So desperate were the times that, as President, Roosevelt signed no less than 15 emergency acts in his first 90 days in office, with the CCC program proving to be one of the most successful and enduring of the New Deal initiatives.

What would become the largest peace-time mobilization of manpower and equipment in U.S. history required the cooperation of many governmental entities. Camps were established according to the work plans of various state and federal resource agencies. The U.S. Army was responsible for the construction and administration of each camp,



Above: CCC enrollees built trails and bridges, like this one at Lower Falls in Letchworth State Park.

Previous page: (Note: CCC enrollees performed their duties in a nation still predominantly divided by race. CCC camps, like the U.S. Armed Forces during the period, were segregated. 24 of the 208 CCC camps in New York were designated for African Americans).



A CCC crew clearing trees on Table Rock at Letchworth State Park, in preparation for building what is now the Lower Falls Bridge.

and for feeding, lodging and outfitting the 220 or so men residing at a typical camp. The Department of Labor worked through local relief bureaus to screen CCC applicants and fulfill camp quotas. Applicants had to be between the ages of 18-25, unemployed, unmarried,

and participated in the CCC initiative throughout its nine-year span, but New York State's program was the largest, with 208 CCC encampments in existence between 1933-1942.

All totaled, New York put 220,000 people through its CCC program. Work projects focused

on camps were purchased through the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and converted into parklands, game management areas or reforestation areas. Many camps conducted work on private lands as well, such as rehabilitation of affected stream corridors

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healthy, not in school, from a needy family, and capable of doing work.

Imagine, if you will, 200 strangers from many different backgrounds and hometowns being grouped to form a company, and sent to an encampment, usually in the middle of nowhere, often across the country (as priorities dictated) to perform unfamiliar work in a climate to which many were not acclimated. The wonderment is, they went eagerly.

Every state in the nation partici-

mainly on improving state parks and forest lands. Though many states did not have any state parks in 1933, New York already had a unified park program in place that was widely recognized as superior to any other state park system in the country. The state's Forest Preserve and reforestation area programs were likewise well established. However, as the Great Depression deepened, many hard-scrabble farms were abandoned. Those located near existing CCC

or managing forest tracts having critical pest, disease or fire control potential.

In New York, the State Conservation Department planned and supervised the work projects of 115 camps in five general categories: recreational development camps, which created trails, lean-tos, and campsites in the Forest Preserve; forest fire control camps, mostly operating in the Forest Preserve; pest control camps to stanch the spread of gypsy moth,

white pine blister rust and Dutch Elm disease; reforestation camps, which improved existing forest areas and re-planted newly acquired lands; and fish and game camps, specializing in fish and game propagation and stream improvement.

In addition, there were 93 other camps in New York overseen by

22 camps were established for veterans, 20 camps for African-Americans, and 4 for African-American veterans.

Areas of highest environmental priority, such as the lower Hudson River and Allegany regions, hosted several CCC camps throughout the entire nine-year build-out. Other encampments were more ephem-

eral" (totalling 3,692,318 acres). As employment opportunities began to increase in the late 1930s, CCC applications began to decline. After the collapse of France in 1940, public support for the CCC program began to wane as attention shifted heavily toward mobilization for World War II. Camps not involved in essential services such

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federal agencies. The Department of Interior oversaw 61 camps dedicated to the development of state park facilities. The Soil Conservation Service and Corps of Engineers operated 21 camps, mostly in central New York, dedicated to flood control and soil stabilization; and the Army operated several camps at military reservations. The Great Depression was especially hard on World War I veterans and African-Americans. Separate camps were established for both groups, as well as for Native Americans. In New York,

eral, their companies moving from one locale to another as projects were completed or as priorities changed. Any community hosting a camp of 200 enrollees would, of course, reap important economic benefits, and elected officials were always eager to land a camp for their district.

In any given year, there were approximately 40 camps operating in New York State, performing more than a hundred documented types of work, from "seed collection--hardwoods" (50 tons collected in total) to "tree insect pest con-

as fire and pest control began to re-focus from conservation projects to pre-war preparation, or were shut down. New York's final camp, North Pharsalia was closed on July 25, 1942.

Even by today's standards of productivity, the mind boggles at CCC achievements, most of which were accomplished by hand:

- stocked more than one billion fish
- planted more than three billion trees
- established 8,192 parks
- treated more than 21 million acres



The stone benches and tables at Letchworth State Park are still in use today.

for tree disease and pest control

- built 9,805 small reservoirs
- spent 6.5 million days fighting forest fires
- established 4,622 fish-rearing ponds
- built 651,087 miles of roadway
- constructed 28,087 miles of foot trails

The CCC program did more than restore our nation's depleted natural resources. It provided critical economic support to the families of enrollees, and an important economic stimulus to the CCC camp host communities. It contributed to the systematization of state park programs, and established universal design standards in "parkitecture." It advanced the education of thousands of enrollees, 40,000 of whom learned to read and write, and even earn degrees while in service. It improved the health and physical development of CCC enrollees, while providing technical training in more than 150 marketable skills, from baking to small-engine repair. And it gave three million young men throughout the U.S. self-discipline, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose, all of which were critical to the even greater challenge ahead: World War II.

Ultimately, in protecting forests, improving stream corridors, developing parks and campsites, enhancing fish and wildlife stocks, and maximizing public access to nature, the CCC did much to develop a culture of environmental stewardship in an increasingly involved public, and raised a lofty expectation of perpetual care and continued growth that in the 75 years since has been difficult to fulfill.

At the outbreak of the Gulf War, Albert Lanoue warned his family, "You'd better stock up on jelly." It sounded odd. But he was speaking from experience. When the Great Depression broke out, he recalled, you couldn't get jelly. In fact, you couldn't get much of anything. But these are different times. The children of the "greatest generation" have plenty of jelly. And vast forest lands. Beautiful parks, bountiful fish and wildlife, and so much more. Thanks in large part to CCC enrollees like Albert Lanoue.

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Editor's note: The CCC's legacy lives on in the nation's 113 service and conservation corps that operate in 41 states and the District of Columbia. Corps annually enroll more than 23,000 young men and women who contribute 13 million hours of service every year. They, in turn, mobilize approximately 125,000 community volunteers who contribute more than 2.4 million additional hours of service. Today's corps are a proven strategy for giving young men and women the chance to change their communities, their own lives and those of their families. Visit The Corps Network at www.corpsnetwork.org to learn more.



Living quarters were primitive, but adequate, and common areas were used after work hours were through. Top-bottom: Mess hall, a CCC band, ping-pong after work, and Albert J. Lanoue, fleet manager at Camp S-72 circa 1936.



Case Study: **Camp S-72, Company 270**



The Delmar "Grouse Camp," 1933-36, was a typical CCC operation, administered by an Army Reserve officer and 200 enrollees comprising CCC Company 270. Enrollees earned \$30 per month, \$25 of which was sent home to the enrollee's family.

Company 270 was initially assigned to Camp P-69, Huntington Forest in Newcomb in June 1933, one of the state's earliest camps. It was a hastily built canvas encampment with no winter quarters, and was moved to the newly-constructed Camp S-72 in Delmar on November 7, 1933.

The chief purpose of Camp S-72 was to convert an abandoned fruit farm into a "game farm" for the propagation of upland game birds and waterfowl. In 1933, populations of waterfowl and game birds,

particularly ruffed grouse, were in serious decline. The relationship of wildlife to habitat management and the ecology of boom-and-bust population cycling were concepts little understood at the time, so enhancing wildlife stocks through game farming made perfect sense.

CCC Company S-72 worked on site for three years erecting brooder houses, damming streams and fencing fields to create for the Conservation Department the Delmar Experimental Game Farm, one of seven such game farms the state would eventually operate. Several CCC enrollees took readily to propagation work and were hired as permanent employees once the camp closed. Their work well done, Company 270 moved to Whitney Point, Camp CE-21 on September 29, 1936 to work on Corps of Engineers projects.



Baseball was a popular leisure activity at CCC camps.



Camp S-72 in Delmar circa 1936.