A half-century has gone by since the Civilian Conservation Corps. In Minnesota, 84,000 young men changed the face of the state with hundreds of conservation projects. “You ate good and worked hard,” recalled one ‘C’

Robert M. Drake

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn in as President of the United States on March 4, 1933, the country was sliding into the depths of the Great Depression. That year, the U.S. had a work force of 52 million of which one-fourth were unemployed. The nation was in deep trouble.

Minnesota fared no better. Twenty-nine percent of its one million workers could not find jobs. On the Iron Range, the unprecedented figure of 70 percent unemployment was recorded. During the previous winter, 137,000 families went on relief. In 1933, the State faced a welfare bill of $9 million. The next year that bill soared to $33 million.

Buried in the unemployment figures were the nation’s youth. In 1933, 54 percent of the country’s young men between the ages of 17 and 25 were without jobs.

But there was work to do. The nation was in desperate need of conservation projects to protect its natural resources. The Midwest “Dust Bowl” had its roots in the farming and grazing practices of earlier gen-
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erations. Logging operations and over-grazing in western states were causing three billion tons of topsoil to wash away each year. Another three billion tons were carried away on the wind.

To correct these abuses, Roosevelt planned to take unemployed young men and form an army to work across the nation. He envisioned an organization that could train, equip, house, feed and give work to approximately 125,000 young men. Seventeen days after his inauguration, the bill putting the idea into form was before Congress. On April 5, 1933, the President signed the Emergency Conservation Work Bill. The Civilian Conservation Corps was launched.

The Bill allowed the CCC to hire unemployed young men between 18 and 25 years for conservation work on public lands. They had to come from families who were on, or eligible for, relief. Pay was set at $30 per month of which $25 was sent home to a man’s family. Once he was enrolled, his family was taken off relief rolls.

The national response was immediate. Within 90 days, 275,000 young men enrolled in the CCC at Army recruiting offices across the country.

World War I Clothes. Minnesota recruits went to CCC headquarters at Fort Snelling. Each received two sets of Army work clothes, a dress uniform, a heavy overcoat, mittens,
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two pairs of shoes, woolen blankets, sheets, a pillow, three pairs of socks, two hats, two pairs of heavy under- wear, and a raincoat.

Carl Anders, Grand Rapids, an April 1933 recruit, remembers: “About three or four of us from Grand Rapids left town at four a.m. by train for Minneapolis. . . . An Army non-com met us at the depot and issued streetcar tokens so we could get to Fort Snelling.

“When we arrived, there were about 25 other boys. They fed us and gave us a bit of orientation by a lieutenant, got our regular Army medical examination, and after a day or two were given clothing of a sort — old World War I clothes that didn’t fit, and they wouldn’t trade anything so it would fit. One boy got a pair of pants that were way too big for him. . . . [The] supply sergeant told him that if he (the sergeant) was a tailor, he would alter them, but since he wasn’t, he wouldn’t.”

“In the daytime, they didn’t know what to do with us, so we were marched around and drilled. . . . After several weeks, we boarded a train [for] our CCC camp. We had no idea where we were going and the rumor was that it was going to be Tennessee. . . . On the way the train windows frosted up so we didn’t have any idea in what direction we were headed. When the train finally stopped, we got off to see where we were. . . . [It] was Chisholm.”

Like the Army and the recruits, Minnesota Department of Conservation district rangers and foresters were in the dark about the program. Often they were told only a few days in advance that 200 CCC boys were arriving in their district. They had to find a location for a camp on high ground, with good water and road access, and line up work projects.

In the rush to establish CCC camps, no one is positive of the location of the first camp in Minnesota. It was probably Camp Gegoka, Company 701, in Superior National Forest. The camp opened on May 7, 1933, and other camps soon followed. In all, Minnesota had a yearly average of 51 camps operating.

At the camps, the U.S. Forestry Service set up daily work assignments. Forestry personnel consisted of engineers, construction assistants, auto and truck mechanics, foremen, and work leaders. Commanding each camp was an Army captain or first lieutenant. He was assisted by an adjutant, and about 25 sergeants, clerks, and cooks.

Each camp hired a civilian teacher — called an Educational Advisor — to provide high school correspondence classes, clerical training, and basic literacy skills. Nationally, 40,000 boys learned to read and write in the “Cs.” Clair T. Rollins, a teacher at Rabideau Camp, recalled: “The objective of the CCC education program was twofold: To give enrollees training and practical experience on jobs . . . in camp, and to fill gaps in their education which
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they missed in elementary and high school back home. . . . Hundreds of [high school-equivalent] certificates were given for these courses.”

Crude Barracks. The first boys arrived at camps that were usually just clearings in the forest, often abandoned logging campsites. They pitched tents, made their first meals, and began to build barracks. The first buildings were crude, but eventually the Army drew up blueprints and camps began to take on the look of small military bases.

Camps consisted of up to 30 buildings — barracks, mess hall, Army officers’ barracks, forestry crew barracks, educational building, hospital, washroom, latrine, garages, storage sheds, and repair shops. Each camp generated its own electricity and pumped its own water.

Camps purchased supplies and materials in nearby towns. The five dollars a month each boy kept for spending money added to the income of stores and shops. On Saturday nights, they boarded trucks and headed for town.

“As the dusty trucks jerked to a stop on a quiet street in Deer River, nearly 200 enrollees dressed in newly pressed Army uniforms exploded from the trucks and scattered like ants to their favorite pool hall, cafe, dance hall, or illegal slot machine,” one resident remembered. “Trucks left for camp at midnight, but it took all the ingenuity and perseverance of the officer in charge, the first sergeant, five barracks leaders, and the town cop to get all those boys back in the trucks.”

Each morning, the young men mustered in front of a row of trucks to receive their assignments. The program emphasized conservation projects, but the Cs also built picnic grounds, baseball diamonds, and parks in towns around the camps. The young men usually worked until four p.m., then returned to camp for the evening meal, classes, and recreation. Lights went out in the barracks at 10 p.m.

By 1937, the CCC program began to wind down. The war in Europe and the Far East had begun to fuel the U.S. economy. Factories and farms needed workers; young men could find work at higher wages than the CCC could offer. On June 30, 1942, the CCC program officially ended. Camps closed, buildings were sold for materials, and campsites became clearings in the forest.

New Careers. Nationally, the program had enrolled three million young men. In nine years, it cost taxpayers $3 billion, but removed nearly 15 million families from welfare rolls. Many young men got started in careers in forestry, carpentry, mechanics, engineering, masonry, and wildlife management.

Nick Radovich, a 1933 recruit from Hibbing, recalled: “The program was good. My mother got $25 a month she never had and could buy $25 a month more groceries, and the
Traveling CCC Exhibit

This year represents the 50-year anniversary of the CCC. To commemorate the program, several organizations — the Iron Range Interpretative Center, the Iron Range Research Center, Carlton County Historical Society, Cook County Historical Society, the Forest History Center, and the U.S. Forest Service — have created a traveling CCC exhibit.

The exhibit — photos, artifacts, and CCC history — will be displayed at these centers in northeastern Minnesota this year and will be available for loan to other organizations. For more information, contact the Iron Range Research Center, Box 392, Chisholm, MN 55719.

Northern Minnesota is fortunate to have one of the few existing CCC camps still intact. Managed by the U.S. Forest Service, F-50 Camp 708 is located near Blackduck. The grounds are open to the public during the summer months. The barracks, offices, hospital, and mess hall buildings can be viewed from the outside.

In Minnesota, CCC crews built 3,330 miles of firebreaks, 1,635 miles of forest telephone lines, and 3,900 miles of forest roads. They inventoried 3,739,500 acres of forest lands, the first comprehensive forest inventory in the state. They collected 9,000 bushels of seed cones and planted 124 million trees. The State Legislature, taking advantage of CCC labor, created 35 new state forests and parks which the CCC inventoried, marked, and improved. Other field work included improving land and streams ruined by soil erosion, and constructing fire towers, forestry buildings, campgrounds, picnic grounds, dams, and culverts.

According to Dennis Ingvaldson, Department of Natural Resources regional forest supervisor, the work done by the CCC is still providing benefits today. "Many log and stone buildings in state parks, sea walls, and picnic shelters were built by the CCC. Tree plantations planted by the Cs are now reaching marketable yields. Without the efforts of the CCC in forest fire prevention, fires would have been much more damaging, and our forests today might have been much different." □

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Air the Flowers Breathe

"And 'tis my faith, that every flower / Enjoys the air it breathes."

— William Wordsworth