

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life*  
*The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

## **Track 1: Introduction**

The Civilian Conservation Corps employed over three million participants from 1933-1942. During the depth of the Great Depression, the CCC, or the C's as it was often referred to, provided the opportunity for unemployed young men to combat poverty and conserve America's dwindling natural resources. In addition to many other useful projects, they planted over 3 billion trees, laid 89,000 miles of telephone lines and constructed over 13,000 miles of foot trails.

*[S]ome of the best years of my life was those two years I spent in the C's. It made a man out of me and I loved every day of it. (Rusty Clemons)*

*Everyone that was in the CCC's was there for a reason.... [A] large percentage of them were, because their parents needed the support that they could provide. (Charles Schmeltzer)*

*Besides all the help for their families and all the parks and everything that we did—but I think building [the] character of the boys was one of the most important things. (Edwin Hill)*

Of all Depression-era programs, the Civilian Conservation Corps perhaps came closest to fulfilling Franklin Roosevelt's vision for his New Deal. The president hoped that a government program would provide not only relief from economic devastation but also healing for ailing spirits during these dark days.

In over one thousand camps in the Pacific Northwest, young men's lives were shaped by their experiences in the Civilian Conservation Corps. "Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life" is the story of men who either worked in CCC camps in the Pacific Northwest, or who worked in camps across the nation and now call the Pacific Northwest their home. Their stories testify to the trauma of the Depression, the promise for better lives, and the lasting legacy of work still enjoyed by subsequent generations.

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life  
The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

## **Track 2: Depression Life**

The Great Depression began in the fall of 1929. In just four years, over 25% of Americans were unemployed. As he assumed the office of President of the United States in 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt cataloged the dismal circumstances facing Americans.

*Values have shrunk to fantastic levels; taxes have risen; our ability to pay has fallen; government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income; the means of exchange are frozen in the currents of trade; the withered leaves of industrial enterprise lie on every side; farmers find no markets for their produce; and the savings of many years in thousands of families are gone. More important, a host of unemployed citizens face the grim problem of existence, and an equally great number toil with little return. (Franklin Delano Roosevelt First Inaugural Address)*

Bread lines, soup lines, closed banks, foreclosed property, and suicides dominated everyday life. Because they were unable to sell their products for a fair price many farmers destroyed crops and commodities, even while millions of Americans went hungry. Survival meant finding the next meal, the next place to sleep for the night, the money to pay past due bills. Ken McMillan, living in Northeastern Washington, remembers searching for work during the height of the Depression.

*I went out of high school, I went over to work in the woods in Idaho ... we went over there and everything was folded up. They were on strike.... We didn't have a dime in our pocket and I went to the sheriff's office to see if he could put us up for the night. And he said, "Oh," he said, "You don't need that." He said, "You'll find something." It's true enough. This cousin and I walked across the bridge there at Orofino and the first thing we did was somebody picked us up and he took us home and he had a farm ... and he asked us if we wanted a job. (clears throat) And we said, "Anything." ... But he took us home and we worked putting up hay for him for about three weeks. Fed us and slept in the cot and after three weeks each one of us left there with about forty dollars in our pocket. (Ken McMillan)*

In many families, unemployed fathers and mothers desperately tried to make ends meet. But for some, the strain of the Depression was too much. John Peterson and his wife Mary Anne remember the painful break up of John's family in the 1930s.

*John Peterson: My dad had left us. And he left us, like I said, broke. And owing every bill. We had to move and we owed the rent. ...[A]nd in a small town you have a butcher bill, you had a milk bill, you had a paper bill, you had a food bill. And I think he owed over a hundred dollars, which was big money, big money in those times. And I told—I was working for the guy that he owed that to and I said, "I can't pay that. That's way beyond me." But I says, "You put everything from now on on my name," and I says, "We'll keep it."... So we did. We kept it and we cleaned up the milk bill and at Christmas time—*

*Mary Anne Peterson: You bought your mother a bag of, was it twenty-five pounds?*

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life*  
*The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

John Peterson: *A hundred pounds of sugar. And that was pretty good money. I forget—I think it cost me ten dollars. And she canned an awful lot of food. My mother was—she was there for us.*  
(John Peterson)

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life  
The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

### **Track 3: A New Deal for Youth**

When he took office in 1933, President Roosevelt's immediate task was to provide opportunities for employment.

*This Nation is asking for action, and action now. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work. This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously. It can be accomplished in part by direct recruiting by the Government itself, treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war, but at the same time, through this employment, accomplishing greatly needed projects to stimulate and reorganize the use of our great natural resources.*  
(Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address)

New relief programs created as part of the New Deal in 1933 brought expanded opportunities, not only for adults, but for youth as well. The Civilian Conservation Corps was one of these programs. The Cs required all participants to be male, between eighteen and twenty-five years of age, capable of physical labor, unemployed, unmarried and willing to allot the major portion of their pay to their dependents, usually parents, brothers and sisters. John Peterson.

*We got paid thirty dollars a month. And when I first went in we were allowed to keep five and twenty-five went home. And then they raised that so we could keep eight and twenty-two went home. So getting a three-dollar raise was a big thing. (laughs) We could go to a show for fifteen cents and get a bowl of soup and a sandwich for a quarter. ... And then, of course, we had to buy our own toothpaste and toothbrushes and cigarettes and whatever like that. Our own slicking for our hair, you know, so we'd look handsome.* (John Peterson)

Young men were able to enlist in several different types of CCC units. The assigned projects served a dual purpose: to provide work for youth and to conserve America's diminishing natural resources.

*[T]hey had forest service camps and they had about five different kind of camps. And they did different—some places was soil conservation, and they built small dams and stuff, and such as that. So they had different projects for different camps.* (John Peterson)

The opportunities the Cs afforded to young men and their families were greatly sought after and many young men enrolled even before they reached the age of eighteen. Charles Schmeltzer was one of them.

*[W]hen I was sixteen and a half years old on the thirteenth of January in 1937, I was enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps. ... I think you were supposed to be eighteen. But I was not the only person who probably lied about their age.* (Charles Schmeltzer)

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life*  
*The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

#### **Track 4: Work Projects**

While they were under the command of military officers in camp, the CCC enrollees came under the jurisdiction of Forest Service, Park Service and Soil Conservation foremen on their work projects. These included building forest trails, planting trees, creating parks, building wood and stone structures and conserving eroding top soil. In addition to the many national and state park structures built by the 3Cs in the Northwest, the Cs built the suspension bridge at Bowl and Pitcher at Riverside State Park and the Vista House at Mount Spokane. John Peterson, stationed at Camp Seven Mile, helped create Aubrey L. White Parkway northwest of Spokane.

*And they usually found local projects as work projects. ... And we sloped all this along the river, along that road. ... And then the three C's put in all the rock work below that, too. And then as you go out along the county road to different places you'll see rocks sitting up that were—they're kind of peaked. And those were all hand cut. I helped do some of that. (John Peterson)*

Camaraderie developed in camp and on the work sites. Emery Jensen, who was stationed in the forests of Northern Idaho, remembers the cooperation needed to cut down trees with a two-man saw.

*You couldn't do it alone. That saw was a little bit too big. [T]hat other guy had to be willing to work with you, because he couldn't work against you. You can work against somebody on the saw gang, but you just don't do anything, you don't get anything done. (Emery Jensen)*

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life  
The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

## **Track 5: Camp Life**

The CCC camps were organized similarly to those run by the military, featuring barracks, mess halls, recreation halls and officers. Enrollees were kept on a strict schedule, which included standing for reveille in the morning, eating their meals at certain times, and standing for roll call. John Peterson, stationed at Camp Seven Mile near Spokane, Washington remembers the strict policy of cleanliness imposed by the officers, even to the point of requiring clean rafters in the barracks.

*[H]e'd reach up on that and rub his hand across that with a glove on, a white glove. If it came down dirty, that meant we went through that thing and we washed the rafters and we washed the windows, the floors, the whole works. ...[A]nd then they'd go back through it and you could lose your weekend. That's what you'd spend your weekend doing. (John Peterson)*

Being confined to camp for the weekend was the usual punishment for unkempt barracks. However, where there was a will to leave camp, the CCC enrollees found a way to do it, remembers Lewis Solomon.

*[I]f number one barrack would be confined to the area and the young man in there has a date that he wanted to go out on, then he'd have a friend in barrack four to come over and go and get in his bed (laughs) for him. ...[A]nd then when the nightwatchman passed through, why, then this boy that's in barrack four, he'd leave out of barrack one—he was covering for this other guy—and run to his own bed in barrack four. (laughs) (Lewis Solomon)*

Youthful pranks and mischief were not uncommon in the CCC camps. Ken McMillan, stationed in Northeastern Washington, remembers one of the pranks enrollees pulled on their peers.

*I'll tell you one thing I can even remember about their playing tricks on ones. Like this one guy, he goes to sleep. This young fellows goes to sleep, so they put, like, shoe polish on his shoes and lit it and then they hollered "Fire!" and out the door he went and right at our end of our barracks was this pond.... And he went head first right into that. (laughs) (Ken McMillan)*

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life  
The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

## **Track 6: First Impressions**

For many young men, arrival in the CCC camp meant stability, order and assurance. Rusty Clemons, stationed at Camp Growden near Kettle Falls, Washington remembers receiving the first regular, nourishing meals he had eaten in years.

*I'll never forget our first meal at that camp. I saw a plate of pork chops in the middle of the table, could not believe it. Never seen so many pork chops. (Rusty Clemons)*

Fred Blood became a cook in the CCC, serving daily meals to over 200 men. He remembers their voracious appetites.

*They usually gained at least a minimum of three pounds the first month. Probably in six months they gained ten or twelve or fifteen, depending on how thin they were. And they built muscle with it, because they were out doing manual labor. (Fred Blood)*

The camps also provided the first running water, indoor bathrooms, and indoor cooking facilities many of the enrollees had ever seen. Lewis Solomon remembers his amazement at the change in his living conditions when he entered the Cs.

*We had running water, we had showers—we could take showers. Everything was changed. Everything was modernized and it made us feel like we, you know—well, it made us feel a better person....[I]t was a complete change, just overnight change, (Lewis Solomon)*

Worden Bishop remembers the anticipation of reaching the CCC camp, not only to be with a group of peers but to be assured that he had a place to sleep at night and meals to look forward to.

*[I was] just happy to get up there with the gang and knowing that you had someplace. You'd have a place to sleep and you'd have your regular meals and you're with a bunch of young fellows that's your age and you're just happy to have a steady job. (Worden Bishop)*

## **Track 7: Experiencing Diversity**

The CCC program brought together people of many different ethnic, religious, racial and geographical backgrounds. The 1933 act creating the 3Cs stated that no discrimination was to be made on account of race, color or creed. Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans were integrated into all-white camps. In the northern and western United States black enrollees were assigned to all-white camps only when there were not enough African Americans to form an all black unit, while in the south blacks and whites were assigned to separate camps. Lewis Solomon, now living in Spokane, remembers the segregated camp at which he was stationed in Texas.

*The whole system down there was segregated, see. We had one young fellow come in that he was a mulatto, his father was white, and his mother was black, ... and they realized that he was black, he was passing, because you couldn't tell, see, and when they found out that's who he was, then they sent him to us, see, into the all-black company, and so that's where he remained and spent the rest of his time there with us. ... It was a segregated unit. The only thing that was about that was the officers. And the lieutenant was white and the foremans was white, ... but all the rest of the units was black. They had, like, two hundred and some odd black young men ... (Lewis Solomon)*

In western Washington State's Columbia National Forest, two companies of all black enrollees were assigned in 1933, and one integrated camp hosted twenty-four African Americans. However, a 1935 directive decreed complete segregation of black and white enrollees. By 1935, there were no African Americans in CCC companies assigned to the Columbia National Forest.

In addition, more than 85,000 Native Americans served in segregated units on reservations. Their units were overseen by the Office of Indian Affairs and included residential camps, camps for married workers and programs in which the workers lived at home and were picked up each morning to be driven to their work projects.

However, one of the more memorable conflicts in the camps was between enrollees from the eastern and western parts of the U.S., as well as from rural- and urban-dwelling communities. John Peterson.

*I do remember one deal that was quite educational, ... they shipped some guys in from New York City, from down in "Toity-toit Street by the Winegar Works." (laughter) ... But they'd come in and they would sit down at the table and stand up and reach across, and all that type of stuff. ... So if they'd reach across for something they'd stab them with a fork, and said, "Say 'Please pass' and we'll pass them to you." ... So it wasn't long till we had them trained into being being pretty good guys. And then they, you know, as time went on, they fell in with everybody else. ... [P]retty quick you didn't know a New Yorker from anybody else. (John Peterson)*

## **Track 8: Mingling with Townspeople**

Interacting with the towns and communities living nearby was crucial for CCC enrollees. Not only did they appreciate a break from camp on the weekends, they also knew that being accepted by the community was important. To that end, open houses were held for the surrounding communities to visit the camps and see how the CCC enrollees lived. Hank Schimmel remembers participating in an open house at the 3C camp in Davenport, Washington.

*I was one of the greeters where they drove up and we would take them around and show them what the barracks looked like, and took them to the mess hall. They even gave them some kind of a meal there. (Hank Schimmel)*

If the camp was situated close to town, enrollees took advantage of the short distance to become more involved in town life.

*[T]hey had a local swimming pool there in 1940 and we was able for a small fee [to] use their swimming pool. I went to the Lutheran church at the end of town,... and they treated me real nice. I remember going to a picnic with them in the summer of '41 in Spokane someplace there. And the movie theatre was a place where we went often, because he sold us—we'd have three movie tickets for a quarter, so naturally anybody in those days was always glad to go see a movie. (Hank Schimmel)*

Although they were widely accepted by townspeople, the CCC enrollees were also seen as outsiders and were watched closely, especially when interacting with local young women. Ida May Goldman lived in Pomeroy, Washington, site of one of the 3C camps, during her teens.

*[I]f the guys had been in their own hometowns they would have been different than they were when they were in a camp, because they would, you know, come to town in the park, and I know some of the girls went out with them. But not everybody would allow their daughters to go out with them. (Ida May Goldman)*

At more remotely situated camps, it was not uncommon for the CCC enrollees to load into the back of a truck and drive to the nearest town to attend dances, eat in restaurants, attend movies, go to church and perhaps make a stop at the local tavern. The enrollees were expected to be on their best behavior as representatives of the CCC program. Fred Blood.

*... [T]hey got to go to dances and danced with the local girls in town, and a lot of them ended up marrying them. But they were pretty decent about everything.... And then if they had a hangover and couldn't do their job the next day, they didn't get to go to camp for a month—or to go to town for a month. So that did a lot to discipline. (Fred Blood)*

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life  
The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

## **Track 9: Evenings in Camp**

One of the benefits of participating in the 3Cs was the opportunity to learn essential educational and life skills. Many of the CCC enrollees never progressed past the eighth grade in school and very few graduated from high school. Edwin Hill was stationed in western Washington during the 1930s and Emery Jensen served in Northern Idaho.

*For instance, in one of the barracks I was in there was a couple of the boys that couldn't write, couldn't write at all or couldn't read, either one. And so I took on the project of writing home for them. You know, they'd tell me what to write and I'd write letters to the parents and stuff like that. And I'd read them what I wrote and that kind of thing, and they'd usually put their mark or an "X" or whatever. But then by the time they left there they would learn how to read and write, at least enough to write a letter. (Edwin Hill)*

*[A]pparently the powers that be realized that a lot of the kids coming in didn't have much education. They didn't finish high school. And so they had educational advisors at each camp. (Emery Jensen)*

In addition, vocational programs like typing, mechanics, photography and truck driving provided skills for the enrollees to apply in later life.

*[T]his made it so kids got out of the three Cs they had a trade almost, sufficient enough to get them in on the ground floor of ... wherever they could find a job. . . [T]hat was part of the reason for the CCs, you learned a profession or a skill. (Fred Blood)*

Sports, music and working on the camp newspaper kept the enrollees busy in the evenings.

*One thing we did have a lot of times in the evening is when there was a musician was just to kind of get together and sing along.... One guy even in them days used to entertain us with his playing the spoons. (Ken McMillan)*

*[T]hey could play in bands or music and we had dance competing, and we had sports like baseball and boxing amongst the other camps, too. So we had a lot of that, which kept the guys active and doing something. Keep them out of mischief. (Fred Blood)*

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life*  
*The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

## **Track 10: Conclusion**

*One thing about the CCCs, it stabilized your life. It gave you a goal in life; a reason. (Ken McMillan)*

By 1942 with the start of World War II on December 7, 1941, the Civilian Conservation Corps had come to the end of its life. The wartime economy boomed and all available men were needed to serve in the armed forces and build equipment for the war effort. For those who had served in the CCCs, transition into military life was not difficult, remembers Edwin Hill.

*I believe it's over ninety percent of the boys in three CCCs were in—later in the World War II, and it helped them a lot ... [I]n fact, it probably helped a lot winning World War II, because we had an army of about three million boys and they're already trained except for arms, you know. (Edwin Hill)*

The physical legacy of the CCC remains on the landscape of the national and state parks, agricultural fields and forests of America. Even after he left the CCC, Emery Jensen still sees its impact on the landscape of Northern Idaho.

*We fought fire there at what was called Four Corners, ... [A]bout a month after that we went back over that same area and planted trees. And after I got out of the Army and was here in Spokane working I had a car and kids and was wanting to figure what to do some weekend, and so we drove up there to see the old fire. (laughs) Those trees are sixty feet high. (Emery Jensen)*

Alumni of the Civilian Conservation Corps continue to gather in the Pacific Northwest and across the nation to remember the lessons and accomplishments of seventy years ago. It is a program past participants hope will be revitalized; a program that will put young people to work and give them a sense of self-worth and purpose.

*[Y]ou learned a value to your life, to what you were doing. And you were more willing to overlook other people's faults, too, ... you learned adulthood, maybe. I can't say enough good about the three CCCs as far as that. (John Peterson)*

Although some scholars argue President Roosevelt's New Deal programs did not radically change the fundamental economic situation of the United States during the Depression, the success of the Civilian Conservation Corps in bringing relief to young men and their families is hard to ignore. It is a model program whose purposes could be applied today, to bring hope and success to millions of America's youth.

"Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life" was created at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. This project was made possible in part by a grant from Humanities Washington, a state-wide non-profit organization supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and local contributors. Project director, oral historian, writer, and editor Rose Sliger. Humanities Advisor Dale Soden. Project Advisor Frank Dorman. Narrator Tom Westbrook. Audio editing and post

*Shaping Youth, Sustaining Life*  
*The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Northwest*

production provided by Larry Ellingson. Cover design by Eli West. Research assistant Kyna Herzinger.