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# THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN DREW COUNTY: "ROOSEVELT'S TREE ARMY" AND CAMP MONTICELLO

by Jan Jenkins

In March 1933, during his first month in office, President Franklin D. Roosevelt began to push through Congress a staggering amount of new legislation designed to relieve the effects of the Great Depression upon American citizens. One piece of this "New Deal" legislation, passed on March 31, established the Emergency Conservation Work program (ECW), which eventually was more widely known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The goals of this radical program were twofold: to reverse the depletion of America's natural resources, initiating soil conservation, flood control, and reforestation projects; and to create work for thousands of young men who were unemployed and without prospects. The new program, directed by Robert Fechner, was put under the joint responsibility of the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, which would plan and direct work projects; the War Department, which would organize, build, and run the camps; and the Department of Labor, which would employ state and local relief agencies to select enrollees. By mid-April, the first CCC camp, Camp Roosevelt, had opened near Luray, Virginia. Other camps were quickly built across the country.

According to John A. Salmond, author of *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study* (Duke University Press, 1967), CCC publications provided a profile of the average enrollee:

... twenty years old when he entered camp, [he] came from a family of six children. His father was unemployed, and he himself had not worked for at least nine months. He had completed the eighth grade. He weighed 147 pounds and was 5 feet 8 1/4 inches tall; thus, he was underweight and below average in height. This is a rather rigid picture and obviously could not have fitted exactly the description of the vast majority of enrollees, yet it is probable that many of them shared at least some of these characteristics.

Initially, enrollment was limited to single, physically-fit, unemployed male citizens between the ages of 18 and 25, who were able to demonstrate need and who were willing to sign on for a period of six months. By September 1933, enrollees could re-enlist for up to two years. In 1935, the age requirements were expanded to include those between 17 and 28 years of age.

Other changes in CCC guidelines were made almost immediately after the program came into being, as the ECW was extended to special groups, including Native American Indians, who were selected by the Office of Indian Affairs and tribal councils for work projects on Indian lands. Another special group was made up of World War I veterans, many of whom were now in their late 30s and early 40s. These were selected by the Veterans' Administration on a state quota and were sent to separate camps. The third special group consisted of "local

experienced men," known as "L.E.M.s," who were selected to act as technical assistants for each camp.

A CCC recruit was subjected to a physical examination at the nearest Army Recruiting Station before he was accepted. Upon acceptance, earlier recruits were taken to nearby Army posts for induction and conditioning, though this practice was apparently abandoned once the CCC camps were fully equipped. Upon his arrival at camp, each recruit was given clothing suitable for his destination, bedding, and toiletries. He would also be provided with shelter, food, medical care, and training. While enrolled, he was paid \$30.00 per month, though he was required to send an allotment of \$25.00 to a dependent. In many cases, this allotment provided financial relief to his family at home. If he had no dependents, this money was kept for him in an escrow account and was paid to him at the end of his CCC service. Eventually, he might be promoted to assistant leader, at \$36.00 per month, or to leader, at \$45.00 per month.

By April 5, 1933, 25,000 recruits had been enlisted, and sites had been identified for the first fifty camps in nine national Corps Areas. Recruitment efforts continued to accelerate, and by the end of June 1933, 270,000 men were assigned to 1,330 CCC camps in groups averaging 200 men to each camp. At its peak, in September 1935, the CCC operated out of 2,514 camps, with 502,000 men. The earliest camp accommodations were tents, though construction of wooden barracks, each housing fifty men, was begun after November 1933. Eventually, the average camp layout included barracks, mess hall, recreation building, quarters for administrative personnel, infirmary, education building, tool and storage shed, and garages.

The work done by CCC workers was diverse, though the program's initial public identification with reforestation projects gave it the nickname, "Roosevelt's Tree Army." Under this title, the CCC actually accomplished much more than the planting of trees. Besides reforestation, CCC workers engaged in fighting or preventing fires, installed telephone lines, and built lookout towers, park buildings, landing strips, roads, and bridges. Agricultural projects included demonstrating soil conservation methods and erosion control techniques to local farmers, as well as surveying, clearing, and terracing farmland for landowners. In addition, the CCC

camps provided much-needed manpower in the event of catastrophe.

### **The CCC in Arkansas**

In May 1933, when CCC organization began in Arkansas, part of the Seventh Corps Area, 39 companies were established, and the first major projects were scheduled for the Ozark and Ouachita National Forests. Arkansas had no state forestry department, but under the direction of Charles S. Gillett, a forestry program was created in time to take advantage of the services offered by the CCC. In addition, State Park projects were approved for Petit Jean, Mount Nebo, Crowley's Ridge, and Devil's Den State Parks. The CCC also built Boyle and Fair Parks in Little Rock.

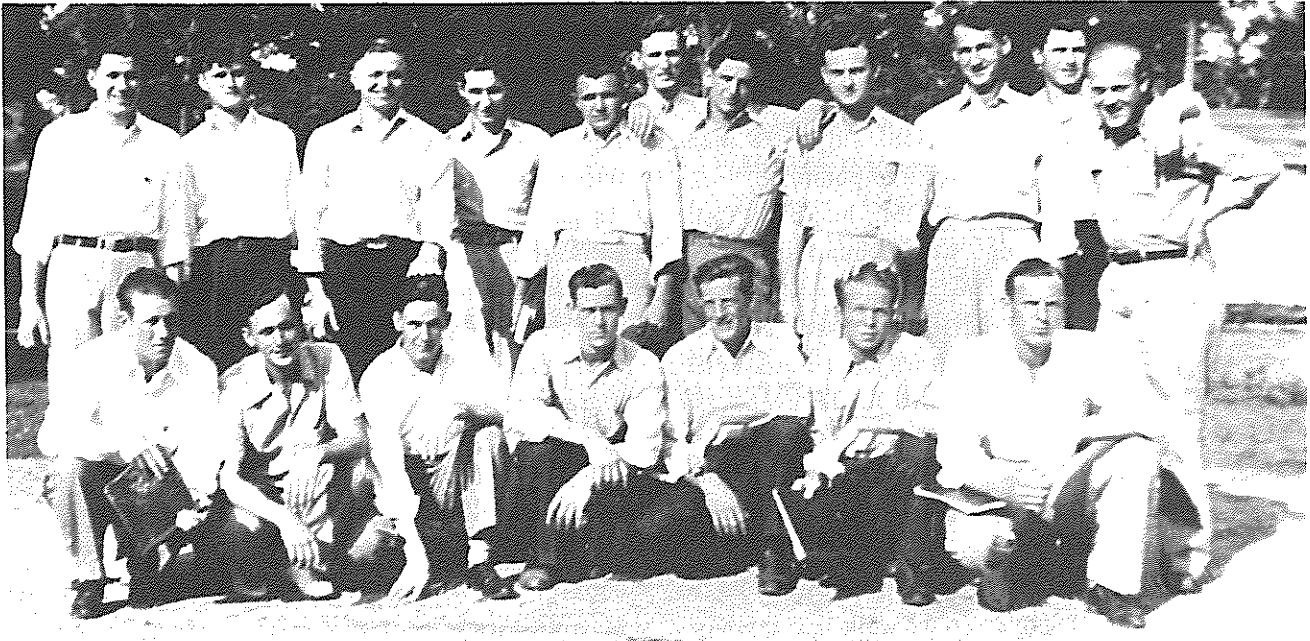
In 1935, at the height of CCC activity in Arkansas, 64 camps were operating in the state, with an enrollment of 13,000 men. Arkansas companies also worked on projects in a number of other states. During the year, Arkansas camps developed new projects under the auspices of the Soil Conservation Service and the White River Migratory Water Fowl Refuge. The latter project became famous for its "floating camp," the only one of its type, which housed and transported its workers on houseboats.

By the time the CCC program ended in 1943, camps in Arkansas had employed 62,882 men. A total of 75,549 Arkansas men had been employed in CCC camps across the nation. In Arkansas, alone, the CCC had planted almost 20,000,000 trees, laid approximately 7,000 miles of telephone lines, and built nearly 5,300 miles of trails and roads. In addition, CCC workers' allotments had provided more than \$17,000,000 in income to Arkansas families.

### **Camp Monticello**

The 3794th CCC Company was established at Monticello on June 26, 1935, when fourteen men and three truckloads of supplies were sent from the camp at Warren to a wooded area between highways 425 North and 35. Before the trucks could deliver their supplies, however, the men had to bridge a twelve-foot gully between the road and the camp site. Within days, the Monticello company had enrolled 217 men, who had to build their new camp while fighting off mosquitoes and chiggers. Barracks replaced tents by mid-October of that year, and ac-

Camp Monticello College Crew



*Back Row, left to right*

Edgar Smith, Shena, Arkansas  
Jarvis Moran, Branson, Missouri  
Hamp Thurman, Paragould, Arkansas  
John Karber, Alpine, Arkansas  
Leo Pope, Johnsville, Arkansas  
Nat Bettis, Donaldson, Arkansas  
George Mobbs, Wooster, Arkansas  
Roy Shope, Okalona, Arkansas  
Victor Hurleywick, Hamburg, Arkansas

Harley Campbell, town unknown  
George Puckett, Green Forest, Arkansas

*Front Row, left to right*

Chester Pounds, Waterloo, Arkansas  
Billy Byasse, Delight, Arkansas  
George Swilling, Grapevine, Arkansas  
Warren Morehart, Mablevale, Arkansas  
Robert Maskall, Booneville, Arkansas  
James Davis, Okalona, Arkansas  
Lester Woodson, Amity, Arkansas

According to the 1937 district *Annual*, these structures were finished just in time for an unusually cold winter.

The camp was settled enough by October 21 for the first issue of the camp newspaper, the *Monticello Messenger*, to appear with a front-page article by camp commander Lieutenant M.B. Eagle, congratulating the enrollees on their handiwork. In the same issue of the *Messenger*, an article notified CCC enrollees that arrangements had been made to allow 25 recruits to attend a lecture-and-lab course in Soils, taught by Marvin Bankston of the Arkansas A&M Agricultural Department. This article stated, "Members of this class can arrange to get college credit on the course if they ever go to college."

Camp Monticello also offered other educational activities. Local guest speakers were invited to appear, and the University of Arkansas offered high school and college correspondence courses for

\$1.50 per half-credit. Those who wished to continue their studies while in the CCC camp were allowed to take "as many as four courses, and may have twenty-four weeks in which to complete" their work. By 1937-38, a small number of camp enrollees were able to spend half-days taking classes at Arkansas A&M. Spiritual needs were covered, as well, since Monticello ministers, or "Sky Pilots," as they were called in the camp, had agreed to hold Thursday-night services for the CCC workers.

The November 21, 1933, issue of the *Messenger* held an article on the first Thanksgiving and the hardships endured by the Pilgrims. This was especially meaningful, as the newly-established camp had just undergone a two-week quarantine after a Camp Monticello CCC worker died unexpectedly of spinal meningitis. The same issue brought more cheerful news, publishing the menu for the first Thanksgiving dinner in camp, promising "Roast Vir-

ginia Turkey," ham, oyster soup, dressing, pies, and, printed in capital letters, "CIGARS." A number of CCC publications throughout the years, including the *Messenger*, happily reported average weight gains by the workers. In February 1936, the *Messenger* announced that since the previous July, 178 men showed a total weight gain of 1,235 pounds.

CCC workers rose at 6:00 A.M., had breakfast, and at 7:00, began an hour's work around the camp. By 8:00 A.M., they were on their off-site assignments. Lunch was delivered to their work sites at 1:00 P.M., and after lunch, work continued until 4:00. Supper was served at 6:00. In the evenings, the workers could read, attend classes offered by the Educational Advisor, or take advantage of the recreation hall with its pool table. "Lights-out" took place at 10:00 P.M. Weekends were the workers' own, and with downtown Monticello only a couple of miles away, "CCC boys" could walk into town or take a thirty-cent cab ride and see a ten-cent movie at the Amuse-U Theater. There, they could enjoy such fare as *A Tale of Two Cities*, with Ronald Coleman, or *The Country Doctor*, featuring the Dionne Quintuplets.

Benson Byrd was 20 years old when he joined the CCC in 1937. Raised on a farm north of Waldo, Arkansas, Byrd, one of six children, had been working at a series of short-term jobs on nearby farms. For some time, he had tried to get into the CCC, aware that the program promised employment and training, but there was one serious obstacle—CCC workers were normally selected from families on the relief rolls, and Byrd's father refused to sign up for relief. On a Saturday in 1937, however, the local taxi driver, who was taking three young men to Magnolia to enlist, stopped his taxi and urged Byrd to ride along, saying, "They might be short. I might be able to get you in." Byrd thus left for CCC camp on a moment's notice. He was enrolled at Magnolia and sent to Camp Monticello. Not until a week had passed was he able to send a postcard to let his parents know of his whereabouts. Byrd, who had never been more than fifty miles from home, reports that the experience was "quite an adventure."

Life in camp was much like being in the army, according to Byrd, who says, "The only thing we didn't do that the army did was drill." Still, he reports, "I enjoyed every minute of it." Byrd remem-

bers that his colleagues at Camp Monticello spent their days clearing land, building fences, digging ponds, and surveying land. He was on a work crew for a while, but when given the chance to work in the kitchen "where the eats were," he took it, starting on K.P. and eventually becoming the camp's pastry cook, a position which paid \$36.00 per month. As pastry cook for a camp of 200 men, he started work at 3:00 A.M. and baked on a huge scale—40 pies at one time, or 500 doughnuts for breakfast. Byrd was trained in large-scale cooking by First Cook James Shook. Byrd remembers one culinary mishap, when he was breaking eggs, four at a time, into a huge mixer full of cookie-dough. His hand slipped, and he dropped four whole eggs into the batter. With no time to spare, he had little choice but to beat the eggshells into the dough, bake the cookies, and take complaints, later. Byrd, who later became First Cook at \$45.00 a month, remained with the CCC for almost two years. While at Camp Monticello, he completed his studies and earned a high-school diploma.

Oscar Fincher, the youngest of nine children, grew up on a farm east of Monticello. A 1936 graduate of Drew Central High School, Fincher was 21 or 22 years old when he joined the CCC in 1938. Working on the family farm and playing baseball on the weekends were his main occupations before he entered Camp Monticello. Though his friends urged him to sign on with them for another camp, Fincher didn't want to leave Monticello. Once in the CCC, Fincher was assigned to a work crew, then to a surveying crew, and he eventually became a leader at \$45.00 per month. After the 1939 Center Point tornado (see *Drew county Historical Journal*, 1994), Fincher recalls that his crew had much work to do, rebuilding fences in that area.

Homesickness was not a problem for him, since his family lived close enough for frequent visits, and his older brother, Frank, who owned the local taxi service, sometimes had fares between Monticello and the camp. Fincher was also able to indulge his love of baseball, playing center field for Camp Monticello's 1939 CCC state championship team. He remembers that the CCC workers had plenty of options for recreation, with speakers and activities at the camp and movies or dances in town. He left the CCC camp in 1939. According to Oscar Fincher,

the most valuable lesson he learned at Camp Monticello was "how to get along with people from all over."

By 1941, many CCC camps were being closed, and Camp Monticello was included in this reduction. By June 1942, with the U.S. involved in World War II, the CCC was no longer necessary. Congress allocated funds for its liquidation. Many of the young men who had found employment and training in these camps had gone on to other jobs, including military service or defense work. Unemployment was no longer a national crisis. From 1933 to 1942, the CCC camps had employed more than 3,000,000 men in a total of 4,500 camps and had completed soil conservation and reforestation projects with a projected worth of \$1,750,000,000. The work of the CCC in forestry, in soil conservation, and in its wide variety of other tasks, had been enormously effective in Arkansas and across the United States. While the CCC successfully accomplished the initial goals for which it was established, it was also successful on a more individual scale. As Benson Byrd recalls, when he went into the CCC, "I was a kid, and I thought like a kid...[the CCC] made a man out of me."

## NOTES

Interviews were conducted (and enjoyed) with the kind participation of Benson Byrd and Oscar Fincher on October 3, 1995.

Background and statistics were obtained from the following: Arkansas, Department of Public Welfare. *Report of Activities*, December 1, 1936.

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Other sources:

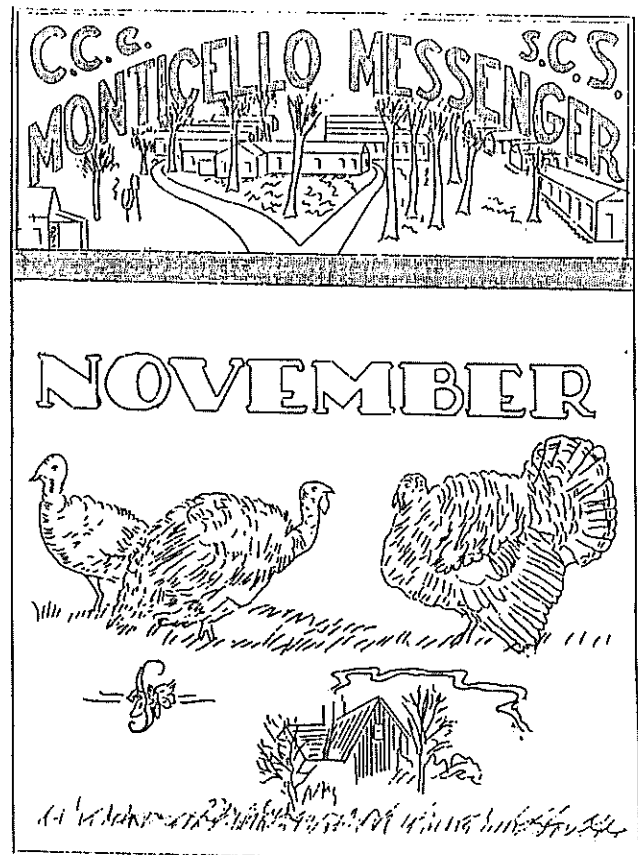
*Advance Monticellonian*, March 31, 1938.

*Arkansas Gazette*, March 23, 1958.

*Monticello Messenger*, 1935-1940.



The CCC Camp sign (in the snow)



A cover from the camp newspaper