

THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN THE CITY: TULSA AND OKLAHOMA CITY IN THE 1930s

By Reid Holland*

Popularly known as the "forest army" of the depression thirties, the Civilian Conservation Corps was one of the least criticized programs of the New Deal. Both the American public and the United States Congress generally accepted the idea of soil erosion work and reforestation as welcome relief for young men. Likewise, both contemporary Americans and professors of history have traditionally associated the Civilian Conservation Corps with the countryside.

Legislation creating the organization, or the Emergency Conservation Work as it was originally called, was signed into law on March 31, 1933, only ten days after its introduction into Congress.¹ The general administration of the Emergency Conservation Work project was relatively simple. Taking advantage of pre-existing federal departments, the Civilian Conservation Corps was headed by a director, Robert Fechner, who was a former executive of the Georgia Machinist Union, while its various programs were carried out by four cabinet level departments under Fechner's guidance. The Department of War was responsible for training the men and administering their camps, while the Interior and Agriculture departments coordinated the technical aspect of the actual projects undertaken in the various states. In addition the Department of Labor aided local state agencies to "sign up" enrollees.

The United States was divided into eight corps areas with state districts in each corps. The men enrolling in these camps had to meet certain age requirements; have "needy" dependents; be unemployed; be single, unless they were veterans; and agree to return a portion of their pay to their family. By amendment to the original bill, blacks were included in those eligible, as were veterans who were older than the initial age requirements. These men served in various programs ranging from the more familiar soil erosion and forestry camps to national and state park camps.²

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¹ United States Government, *Congressional Record*, 73rd Congress, 1st Session (multi-volumes, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934) Vol. LXXVII, pt. 1, pp. 630-651, 701.

² Director of the Civilian Conservation Corps, *Annual Report of the Director, 1933* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934), pp. 1-25.

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These state park camps were often, although not always, located in a city in what was actually a city park, and according to the official designation, of Civilian Conservation Corps were "metropolitan park camps." The work done in these urban areas has been neglected by historians of the period; and yet these projects were essential to the growth of many urban areas in the 1930s. John Salmond, the only recent scholarly historian of the Civilian Conservation Corps, does not emphasize the work accomplished by enrollees—especially in the urban atmosphere. William Leuchtenburg, a well-known New Deal historian, devotes one meager paragraph to the project in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, and makes no mention of the work in urban areas. Naturally enough, contemporaries writing about the "tree army" emphasized the work which was most widely publicized, that of soil erosion control and reforestation—hence the name "tree army" or "forest army." Very few authorities in the 1930s, or now, associate the Civilian Conservation Corps with the city. Yet, many American cities today have adequate municipal park systems only as a result of its efforts. Many metropolitan areas had no park systems at all until the enrollees provided needed labor. While others owned only undeveloped or partially developed land which was improved by the enrollees. Not only did the Civilian Conservation Corps begin construction of new city parks, but it also completed this work in a manner allowing many of these facilities to remain functional for the past forty years.³

The South and border states, as a whole, benefited in sheer number of camps, as much or more than any other area of the United States. Director Fechner's *Report to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937*, indicated that there were more camps in Texas than any other state. However by 1942, Oklahoma, which ranked fourth in 1937, had more camps than any other locale.⁴ Other urban areas in the South also had their share, and camps in Little Rock, Arkansas; Austin and Fort Worth, Texas; Washington, D.C.; and Florida's Botanical Gardens near Miami all accomplished significant work between 1933 and 1942.

Three urban parks in Oklahoma provide excellent examples of the influence of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the area of urban development. Of the sixty-four camps within the state two were located in Okla-

³ John Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1967); William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 174.

⁴ Reid Holland, "Life in Oklahoma's Civilian Corps," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 2 (Summer, 1970), p. 234.

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Typical Civilian Conservation Corps scene in Oklahoma

homa City and a third in Tulsa.⁵ Company 895, assigned to the development of Lincoln Park in Oklahoma City, maintained two camps—SP-2 and SP-4—from 1933 to 1937. While the second company in Oklahoma City—Company 868—was assigned to Northwest Oklahoma City Park, now Will Rogers Park. In addition the camp in Tulsa—SP-12—worked closely with Tulsa city planners in developing Oklahoma's largest municipal park, Mohawk Park. As a result of their work these three municipal

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-234.

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park camps were relatively exemplary of city camps throughout the United States.*

The Lincoln Park camps were established on October 3, 1933, only a few months after the Emergency Conservation Work became law. Its members were composed of white junior enrollees, single and non-veterans, who camped just west of Northeast Lake and were under the supervision of the Park Service of the Department of the Interior. Most camps were organized for 200 men, and the Lincoln Park installation usually enrolled close to that number. The commanding officers of the camp included three United States Army Reservists and a supervisory staff comprised of eleven men trained in landscaping, agronomy, planning and other necessary skills. These staff officers were paid regular salaries; while the enrollees were paid \$5.00 of their \$25.00 monthly check—the remaining \$20.00 was remitted to the enrollee's dependents.

In addition to their pay, the enrollees received food, clothing and lodging. Also the Lincoln Park camp had a resident surgeon who provided medical care, which included monthly checkups for respiratory and venereal diseases. The installation was provided with water and electricity from commercial sources in Oklahoma City, and thus had many conveniences not found in forest camps. The Oklahoma City park camps even included flush toilets! In addition regular religious services of all denominations were held through the cooperation of Oklahoma City ministers.

Perhaps the most striking among the benefits received by enrollees in the Lincoln Park municipal camp were the educational opportunities. All camps offered some basic courses in both academic and vocational fields, but the enrollees at Lincoln Park were offered far more than the normal reading, math, English and woodworking classes. They could take such courses as trigonometry, algebra, astronomy, orchestra, architectural decorating and radio which were offered by instructors recruited from nearby urban schools. The instruction provided in orchestra and astronomy was especially unique and not offered at any other camp in the state.

The work done by the enrollees at Lincoln Park included all phases of park development. The outline of the original park facilities had been expanded by planners from the National Park Service and a 720 acre work area designated. The project supervisors directed the men in carrying out the plans of the Park Service and Oklahoma City Park Department. Ini-

* As mentioned in the text, the major source of detailed information about a particular camp is the *Camp Inspection Reports*, which were made every six months while the camp was in operation. See *Camp Inspection Reports*, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (SP-2, SP-3 and SP-4) and Tulsa, Oklahoma (SP-12), National Archives, Washington, D.C.



Typical work scene of Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees in the urban areas of Oklahoma

tially, the grounds were seeded, trees planted and road beds built; however, one major piece of construction undertaken was the amphitheatre, which still stands in the northern region of the park. Using native stone, the men built roads, trails, parking areas, picnic tables, bridges, drainage ditches and other facilities which greatly increased the recreational uses of the park.

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The technical staff of the camp was aided in their direction of the work by project leaders selected from the enrollees for their leadership qualities and by locally experienced men chosen from nearby cities for their ability to operate heavy equipment or knowledge of other necessary skills. All worked eight hours a day, five days a week to complete a project which was both technically sound as well as economically beneficial to the city and the Civilian Conservation Corps.

As work progressed, the camp required many outside supplies to maintain itself. Though most of these were purchased from merchants in Oklahoma City such as Evans Pure Milk Company, the Capitol Hill Baking Company, the Import Brewing Distributors and the New State Ice Cream Company, many staples were sent to the installation from the military quartermaster at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.⁷

Most of the land for Lincoln Park had been acquired in 1909, but had remained undeveloped until the Civilian Conservation Corps offered an adequate labor force. The first comprehensive Oklahoma City park plan had not been undertaken until 1923 and was not completed until 1928.⁸ Thus, the opportunity to utilize the badly needed labor to expand on these plans was timely to say the least. Northwest Park in Oklahoma City, which had been purchased in 1912, had been essentially undeveloped until the 1930s when the Civilian Conservation Corps provided the necessary labor.

The enrollees assigned to Northwest Park worked in a somewhat smaller area but were organized along the same lines as their sister camps. Three reserve officers commanded the camp, while the work supervision was directed by civilian technicians. There were approximately 180 men at Northwest Park in addition to 15 locally experienced men. However, unlike the company at Lincoln Park, five of the enrollees at Northwest Park were "colored" according to the camp inspection reports. These blacks were summarily assigned to the mess hall and lived in separate barracks. Established on October 12, 1933, nine days after the Lincoln Park camp, its facilities were similar, with the necessary water and power purchased from Oklahoma City as well as many supplies.

Directed by John Best, a landscape architect, Northwest Park included 160 acres, and the majority of the recreation facilities and roadways constructed by the enrollees still stand today. Both Oklahoma City park projects were coordinated by H. H. Cornell, a special inspector of the National Park

⁷ *Camp Inspection Reports*, Oklahoma City (SP-2 and SP-4) October, 1933, to October 1935. National Archives.

⁸ Leslie R. Davis, "The Oklahoma City Park System," unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1955, pp. 11-13.

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Service in charge of the Oklahoma City program, this allowed the city through its Park Department Superintendent, Donald Gordon, to express its wishes to the Park Service. The two men often exchanged advice and plans in an effort to facilitate project work.⁹

Similar projects were undertaken in Tulsa. Though the city had begun a major park development—Mohawk Park—north of the central business district, only with the aid of the Civilian Conservation Corps was extensive work undertaken. The land for the park had been purchased in 1927, and in the next year Tulsa citizens voted a bond issue to provide money for the necessary equipment. Nonetheless little had been accomplished at the site because of the first four years of the depression.¹⁰

According to official reports, some men at Mohawk Park were "colored," and the camp was official designated as a "mixed" camp; nevertheless the two races were strictly segregated. Separate barracks, toilets and dining schedules suggest there was little actual "mixing" of the two races; however, apparently this atmosphere did not produce any serious incidents at Mohawk Park as it did in other "mixed" camps. Only once in its four-year existence did the federal inspector indicate camp morale was "poor" owing to the tension between the races. Established on October 30, 1934, one year later than the Oklahoma City camps, the number of men in the Tulsa installation varied from 201 in 1934, to 154 on October 4, 1937, only 2 days before it was closed.

Four Reserve Army officers commanded the camp in Tulsa while nine project supervisors directed the actual work. Consisting of 2,250 acres, the development was the largest urban project in Oklahoma, and the plans included a large drainage area which was transformed into a lake complete with boat houses and other lakeside facilities. In addition, fire places, picnic tables, bicycle trails, roads, foot bridges and sewer lines running from numerous "comfort stations" were constructed by the enrollees. Also two major "refectories" or concession stands were erected and two shelters and one latrine built in the far northwest corner of the park, which was a segregated "negro picnic area." The men at Mohawk Park worked eight hours a day to complete these projects, as did the men in other camps; however, on one occasion the enrollees complained to the federal inspector of being forced to work on "K.P." duty in the mess hall after a full day's work. Apparently the complaint brought federal action, and the situation was corrected.

⁹ *Camp Inspection Reports*, Oklahoma City (SP-3) October, 1933, to October, 1935, National Archives; *Oklahoma City Times* (Oklahoma City), October 4, 1933, p. 6.

¹⁰ Robert Garner, "The Tulsa, Oklahoma, Park System," unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1953, pp. 11-13.



Members of the Civilian Conservation Corps assigned to the development of Mohawk Park in Tulsa

Perhaps because the men at the project were mostly black or older veterans, the educational courses offered were not as generous as those in Oklahoma City, even though Tulsa probably could have provided a wide curriculum had its leaders intended to do so. The major courses were carpentry, woodworking, reading, auto mechanics, first aid, citizenship and *Bible* reading.

Regardless of the occasional complaints and the strict segregation, genuine cooperation between these two cities and the Civilian Conservation Corps produced better park systems in both urban areas. Enhanced with park facilities the municipalities, in turn, gained new markets for their goods and services. In addition, the enrollees were given a place to live, work and receive some education during the height of the depression. For the men, the gain was perhaps a temporary one, but for the urban parks in Oklahoma City and Tulsa the advantages were permanent.¹¹

¹¹ *Camp Inspection Reports*, Tulsa (SP-12) October, 1934, to October, 1937, National Archives; "Development Outline Report," (Master Plan, Mohawk Metropolitan Park); Interview, Cliff Hall, Tulsa Park Department employee since 1928; Holland, "Life in Oklahoma's Civilian Corps," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XLVIII, pp. 224-234.

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Of course, all three urban parks have been expanded in the years since the depression—Oklahoma City's Lincoln Park has added to its zoo and Mohawk Park has added an enlarged golf course. However, had it not been for the Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees working in the 1930s on comprehensive plans developed by city officials in the late 1920s, these urban parks might never have become the major metropolitan recreation areas they are today.

By ignoring the urban ramifications of the work of the "forest army," Americans have received a somewhat one-sided picture of its goals. It is true that most Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees spent their time on reforestation and soil conservation projects, but some were within sight of cities, and at least a significant part of the thrust of their work was in urban areas. In these locations, the "forest army" came to town, and the results were excellent metropolitan park systems.