

LIFE IN OKLAHOMA'S CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS

*By Reid A. Holland*¹

This study examines a relatively little known and too infrequently remembered aspect of a decade of depression in Oklahoma—the Civilian Conservation Corps. The vital history of the CCC in Oklahoma is reflected in the multiplicity of projects, the professional supervision, the soil erosion work, the camp environment, and the educational programs which were all a part of living and working in Oklahoma's CCC camps.

Congress approved the first Emergency Conservation Work bill during the first whirlwind one hundred days as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal took shape. Roosevelt personally understood and appreciated the values of conservation. As Governor of New York, he had put many men to work in the forests of New York, and he had obtained knowledge of conservation techniques through beautifying his Hyde Park estate. Roosevelt envisioned enrolling healthy, single, unemployed men from the ages of 17 to 26 into a work force to plant trees, to sod grass, to build bridges, to fight forest fires, and to construct park facilities. Enrollees received a "safe wage" of \$30 per month. This admittedly small salary was low enough to be accepted by labor union spokesmen, and yet was more than a man could receive from relief payments. Each enrollee allotted at least \$25 per month to his family in an effort to relieve the huge relief burdens arising from the depression. These men lived and worked in a camp atmosphere different from civilian life. Many Oklahoma men shared this experience, including Oklahoma veterans and Indians, who enrolled in late 1933 under a major expansion of the original bill.²

The administration of the CCC on both the national and state levels developed into an intricate operation under the leadership of Robert Fechner, the Director of the CCC.³ Camp commanders, appointed to direct the day-to-day management of

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² *Congressional Record*, 73rd. Cong., 1st Sess. Vol. 77, pt. 1, pp. 630-651, 701, 983.

³ This paper does not encompass a detailed discussion of the administration of the CCC. For information see: Charles P. Harper, *The Administration of the CCC*. (Clarksburg, West Virginia: Clarksburg Publishers, 1939).

each CCC camp, were in turn coordinated by a state director of the CCC. These camp commanders were usually reserve military personnel. Civilian project commanders supervised the field work under the auspices of the War Department, Interior Department, or Agricultural Department, depending on what type of work was involved.

Projects conducted by the Corps in Oklahoma may be divided into six major categories. National Park camps, national forest camps, State forest camps, State park camps, soil erosion camps, and biological survey camps all did significant work in the state. Codes identified each type of camp. For example, CCC camp NP-1-0 indicated the location of the Platt National Park camp near Sulphur, Oklahoma. A brief look at the work plans of five typical camps will illustrate the various projects conducted in Oklahoma.

The camp at Platt National Park, under the direction of the Interior Department, was located just inside the grounds of the park. The project included such work as maintaining roads, policing camp grounds, and planting trees and grass. Many of the mineral spring shelters illustrate the stone construction so characteristic of the work done by the CCC; and most of these facilities are still in use today. Enrollees worked the grounds of Platt from May, 1933 to January, 1940, making it one of the lengthiest operations in the state.⁴

The camp near Blackwell, Oklahoma (SCS-4), a soil erosion camp, operated from September, 1935 until March, 1941. Holopeter, as the camp was nicknamed, maintained projects on private land covering a radius of ten miles. Work here included terrace sodding, contour farrowing, pond construction, tree planting, dam building, and surveying. This work was done with direct cooperation of the farmers in the area who furnished grass, seed, and other supplies in exchange for CCC labor.⁵

Present day Mohawk Park in Tulsa, Oklahoma (SP-12), is another example of CCC work. Most of this park was built by a company of black and white veterans. Racially mixed camps such as Mohawk Park were rare in Oklahoma, and where they did exist, separate facilities were maintained for each race. Veterans

⁴ Civilian Conservation Corps, *Camp Inspection Reports*, Oklahoma, 1933-1942, National Records and Archives Service, Record Group No. 35. (hereafter cited as *Inspection Reports*, with specific camps and dated cited where possible), Sulphur (NP-1-0), 1935-1940; *Sulphur Times Democrat*, 1933-1935, 1938-1940.

⁵ *Inspection Reports*, Blackwell (SCS-4), October 5, 1936 to March 17, 1941.

at Mohawk engaged in building boat houses and picnic accommodations throughout the park grounds.⁶

One of the all-black camps in Oklahoma, camp A-1-O, was located on the military reservation at Fort Sill near Lawton, Oklahoma. The project area encompassed the entire reservation of 57,000 acres. Such tasks as building truck trails, culverts, bridges, and fire breaks occupied most of the enrollees' working day. Many CCC camps, Fort Sill among them, were responsible for erecting historical monuments. The project at Fort Sill undertook to restore an old stone corral, formerly a part of the original fort. Oklahoma enrollees were stationed here pending physical examinations and camp assignments, since Fort Sill acted as the Oklahoma district headquarters.⁷

Near Stapp, Oklahoma a major reforestation project included the Cedar Lake recreation region totaling 350,000 square acres. Over 135 miles of truck trails built by the CCC provided access to the area. The enrollees also constructed park buildings and facilities. The Stapp camp (F-1-O), like Sulphur, operated over a long period of time, from 1934 to 1941.⁸

In these five camps and the other eighty-three camps located in Oklahoma between 1933 and 1942, the various CCC projects affected both Oklahoma and Oklahomans. The success of these projects is easily seen through an inspection of the technical staff directing the work of the camps, together with an examination of the planning and execution of one particularly important phase of the CCC work—the soil erosion work.

Each CCC project demanded trained technicians and skilled professionals to supervise the work. For instance, projects in a soil conservation camp like Blackwell required the skill of an agricultural engineer and a staff trained in conservation and agronomy. Two agricultural engineers, a conservationist, an agronomist, and two senior foremen directed the work at Blackwell. Project supervisors received an average annual living wage of \$1700 rather than the relief wage received by enrollees.⁹

In addition to the supervision of the field work, many conservationists worked on planning projects based on local com-

⁶ *Inspection Reports*, Tulsa (SP-12), January 25, 1935 to October 4, 1937.

⁷ *Inspection Reports*, Fort Sill (A-1-O), September 18, 1937 to May 31, 1942; The Oklahoma district was included in the Eighth Corps Area along with Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

⁸ *Inspection Reports*, Stapp (F-1-O), February, 1934 to March, 1941.

⁹ *Inspection Reports*, 1933-1942.

munity needs.¹⁰ Official plans, drawn up with the cooperation of the farmer explicitly outlined each step to be taken in the soil conservation project. Such planning resulted in a new relationship between the federal, state, and local government and individual land owners. So successful were the conservationists at Blackwell that they put a total of 49,706 "agreement acres" under contract. The majority of Oklahoma farmers contacted cooperated with the CCC program, thus giving a special boost to Oklahoma's farm economy.¹¹

The soil erosion control camps affected a greater impact on the state as a whole than did any other type of camp. However, work in the forestry and park camps progressed under the same basic type of project supervision as did the SCS camps. Aside from the professional supervision, all camps relied on promising young men selected from the ranks of the enrollees to act as "project leaders" in assisting the work direction. Through this able supervisory staff Oklahoma's "tree army" successfully completed work on a wide range of projects.

The state map for 1935 reveals the variety of work and the diversity of projects contributing to a more beautiful and more productive state. In 1935, fifteen park camps, seven forestry camps, twenty-five soil conservation camps, and two military reservation camps existed in Oklahoma. The location of these forty-nine camps is illustrated in figure 1 below. After an initial growth period from 1933 to 1935, the strength of the CCC camps remained stable until the termination of the CCC. The SCS camps and the park camps comprised the bulk of the camps in the state throughout the last half of the life of the Corps.

Oklahoma soon became a national leader in the number of soil conservation camps operating within any district. From 1936 to 1938, Oklahoma ranked third nationally behind Texas and Illinois in the number of active soil erosion control camps. Over the nine year period of operation more than one-half of Oklahoma's camps conducted soil conservation programs. Of all of the accomplishments of the CCC, its conservation work was the most noteworthy.¹²

The success of the Corps' program was personally cited by Robert Fechner, director of the CCC. The work at Platt National Park and Lincoln Park outdoor theatre were listed as examples of work done by the CCC "which would benefit Oklahomans for

¹⁰ CCC projects were allotted to the state based on the population of the community, the availability of work, and local cooperation.

¹¹ *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 22, 1935, p. 12.

¹² *Inspection Reports, 1933-1942.*

years to come.”¹³ However, the CCC also changed the lives of the men who worked on and helped complete the array of conservation and recreational projects. When not in the field, Oklahoma enrollees lived in a camp atmosphere largely of their own making.

The camp environment had all the characteristics of a small community. The men built their own barracks and other camp buildings. Army officers and locally experienced men, or “LEMS” as they were called, supervised the construction process. Some of the LEMS were employed full time by the camps to meet the technical demands of the project. Nearby local markets provided the camp with electricity, water, and usually sewage service.¹⁴

The diagram in figure 2 of McAlester, Oklahoma's CCC camp illustrates the typical camp design. Complementing the barracks, mess hall, and recreational hall were other features of the camp community. A “PX”, or camp canteen, offered the enrollees cigarettes, candy, magazines, and other notions. Mail deliveries arrived regularly once a day. Telephone lines connected the commander's quarters with the nearest city or town. A machine shop kept tools in shape and vehicles in running condition. And camp libraries provided the men reading material.

The daily schedule of camp life varied little due to the military routine. Enrollees awoke to a bugle blast from the night watchman at 6:00 in the morning. After breakfast and camp policing, the camp commander officially “turned over” the work crews to the project leaders for the day's labor. A few enrollees were assigned camp duty as medical aides or as cook's assistants, but most worked in the field. The crews worked at least six hours a day five days a week. In addition to the regular work schedule, the men were responsible for emergency duty in case of forest fires, floods, or other natural disasters. On Saturdays and Sundays the schedule allowed the men free time to visit the nearby town or to receive visitors in camp.

A vital task in the camp community was that of maintaining health and physical fitness. Nourishing and palatable meals generally improved the health of the enrollee, and in most cases improved his weight. Even though beer often accompanied meals, some enrollees did voice complaints about the food. The men frequently argued that the Army officers ate better than they did.

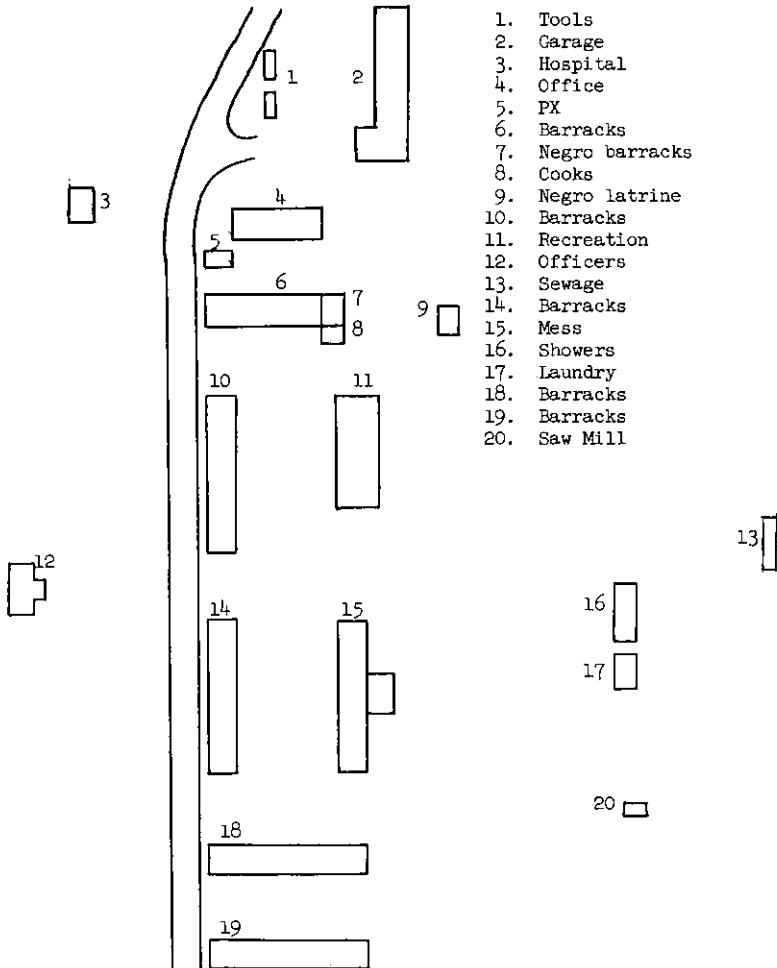
The medical officer assigned to each camp controlled the

¹³ Director of the Civilian Conservation Corps, *Annual Report of the Director of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1934* (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), p. 19. (hereafter cited as *Director's Report*.)

¹⁴ *Inspection Reports, 1933-1942; The Perry Daily Journal*, March 20, 1934, p. 1, *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 9, 1933, p. 12.

FIGURE 2

DIAGRAM, CCC CAMP, MCALESTER, OKLAHOMA, 1936



Source: Oklahoma Camp Inspection Reports.

sanitation and safety conditions of the camp. Most camps had a resident doctor and facilities to house bed patients if need arose. Testing the water supply, approving the camp diet, and supervising the camp's disposal system occupied the doctor's time when he was not attending patients.¹⁵

A separate dental program operated by the CCC divided the state into three districts with one dentist assigned to the camps in each area. This meant that a single dentist spread his time over approximately eleven camps, staying two weeks in each camp. During these two weeks the dentist attempted to examine as many men as possible, in addition to performing operations and emergency treatments.¹⁶

Active recreation programs further promoted the good health of enrollees. Camp recreation halls usually housed a pool table, "ping-pong" games, and other indoor pastimes. Outdoor sports interested the men most with nearly every camp fielding baseball and basketball teams. Intramural schedules often set one camp against another or against a local town team in baseball and basketball tournaments, in boxing bouts, and in other sports.

Living and working in these Civilian Conservation Corps camps was not, as some of the above description may suggest, a combination of hard work, good meals, and weekend baseball games. Enrollees also had opportunities for individual self-improvement through various educational and training programs. While not a part of the original CCC bill, these programs were initiated in 1933 after President Roosevelt approved a plan for attaching advisors to each camp. Educational advisors to the President viewed the CCC as a means of eliminating illiteracy among enrollees, removing deficiencies in the most common subjects, offering "cultural" education, building character and citizenship, and assisting enrollees in securing permanent employment.

Regular classes met three or four times a week in most camps. Such classes included both primary and secondary educational levels. Arithmetic, grammar, spelling, and writing comprised the majority of elementary course work. Pressure on the illiterate or barely literate enrollee to take these courses usually resulted in full class rooms. Many camps conducted their own graduation exercises for those who passed exams approved by the state, thus allowing them to receive accredited eighth grade certificates.

The secondary curriculum included courses in agriculture, bookkeeping, typing, English, history, social science, and health-

¹⁵ *Inspection Reports*, 1933-1942.

¹⁶ *Inspection Reports*, 1933-1942; Sumner A. Russman, D.D.S., former dentist attached to the Oklahoma CCC, letter to the author September 6, 1968.

and-safety. Camps situated near college campuses often utilized the college facilities. In at least two instances, Oklahoma A & M College (now Oklahoma State University) and Central State College, offered special course work.

Most Oklahoma enrollees welcomed the chance to improve their education. Over eighty per cent of the men in Oklahoma camps participated in the course work. Despite this obvious interest in formal classwork, enrollees exhibited greater interest in the possibilities of vocational and on-the-job training through greater participation. Each experience in the work day of the enrollees amounted to a unique type of vocational training. Men could hardly operate a surveying unit without first learning how it worked. This situation applied to almost all of the work done by the CCC, as most of the enrollees were not only young but also inexperienced. Rock quarrying, truck driving, and carpentry—all essential to CCC programs—were easily mastered by the enrollee interested in these skills. Class room vocational instruction was also offered, with courses in automotive mechanics, cooking, mechanical drawing, masonry, soil conservation, forestry, and woodworking being the most popular with the enrollees.¹⁷

The responsibilities of coordinating these activities belonged to the educational advisor. He taught most of the courses, except those requiring special skills which were taught by the camp's military officers or the technicians. In addition to his teaching duties, he arranged for class rooms, teachers, materials, and texts. Most Oklahoma camps maintained an average of seventeen to twenty course offerings, which kept the educational advisor busy. Some camps built their own "schoolhouse"; but if such a building could not be built, the recreation hall, the dining hall, the hospital, the shop, or a local building might be used.¹⁸ Libraries and reading rooms augmented the instruction given in the class room or the field. And this instruction paid off by upgrading the general quality of work performed.

The total camp atmosphere greatly influenced Oklahoma's young and needy. The hard work, the fresh air, the wholesome meals, and the educational opportunities affected the lives of over 100,000 Oklahomans. But not all enrollees benefited equally.

Oklahoma Negroes did not enjoy the high degree of morale which the white enrollees experienced. The original Emergency Conservation Work bill contained an amendment prohibiting all discriminatory practices in the CCC. Despite this, many states

¹⁷ *Inspection Reports, 1933-1942.*

¹⁸ *Inspection Reports, 1933-1942.*

enrolled Negroes disproportionately to their population.¹⁹ Oklahoma enrollment statistics do not reveal the number of blacks enrolled in each county, and, therefore, no appraisal of enrollment can be made. Each county enrolled men on the basis of assigned "quotas" usually given in two figures: one for the white enrollees, and one for the black enrollees. For example, Payne county often advertised a quota for eight or nine black enrollees and fourteen white enrollees.²⁰

Once enrolled, blacks were discriminated against and summarily assigned the most menial tasks as cooks and janitors. Blacks worked and lived in both "mixed" and all-black camps. As figure 1 above illustrates, five all-black camps existed in the state in 1935; as many as eight operated in the state during the depression. It is probable that Oklahoma blacks received better treatment in these all-black camps. But, mixed companies quartered the races in different barracks, separated their bathing facilities, and scheduled their meals at different times. Nothing was thought about this simple separation of the races, for it was common custom to treat Negroes in such manner. Several "near race riots" brought investigation to the Fort Sill and Cache camps, but major incidents were averted.²¹

Despite this drawback, Oklahoma citizens reacted positively to the Civilian Conservation Corps. An overwhelming majority of Oklahomans recognized and appreciated what the CCC was doing for their state. Oklahoma farmers especially benefitted from new farming techniques. Naturally, many local citizens were at first apprehensive about 200 young single men moving into their immediate area; but such fears soon dissipated.

Cooperation between the camps and the nearby communities made it possible to build public confidence as well as to build conservation projects. Local civic groups often invited the camp commanders and the project supervisors to speak at luncheons and meetings informing the public about the CCC work. Frequent visits and tours of projects along with the everyday sight of CCC work crews in the fields soon convinced Oklahomans of the usefulness of the CCC program.

The monthly enrolled strength of the CCC in Oklahoma was slightly over 8,000 men. Consequently, the relief burden of the state became less and less. In 1936, the CCC in Oklahoma em-

¹⁹ John Salmond, "The Negro in the Civilian Conservation Corps", *The American Historical Review*. Vol. LII (June, 1965), pp. 73-88.

²⁰ *The Stillwater News*, July 5, 1938, p. 1.

²¹ *Inspection Reports*, 1933-1942.

ployed men from 13,112 Oklahoma families formerly on relief. By 1937, Oklahoma ranked fourth in the nation in the number of enrolled men behind Texas, Illinois, and New York. Near the beginning of 1942, Oklahoma operated more CCC camps than any other state, but they were not to last.

From June, 1940 to June, 1941, Oklahoma discharged over 48,000 men to accept employment in the military service or in defense plants. On March 6, 1942 the first official word came that the CCC would begin drastic cutbacks. Throughout the summer months Oklahoma camps were abandoned. A few were turned over to the Army, but most were just forgotten.²²

The heritage left Oklahoma by the CCC should not be forgotten. The newly created state park system, the impetus given to scientific conservation, the unique job training, the educational opportunities, and the employment given to Oklahomans were all facets of the CCC which made Oklahoma a better place to live.

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In addition to the following sources the newspaper department in the Oklahoma Historical Society Building, Oklahoma City provides local news coverage of the CCC. The author conducted extensive visits and correspondence with many former enrollees still living in Oklahoma.

²² *Director's Report*, 1938, p. 27; *The Daily Oklahoman*, March 7, 1942, p. 1; *The Enid Morning News*, March 17, 1942, p. 3.