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THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS INVADES EAST TEXAS, 1933-1942

by James Wright Steely

Early accounts of East Texas almost always included descriptions of the thick forests of stately pines that covered the land. Modern East Texas residents and visitors might conjure different images of the region, but the sight and scent of pine trees remain inseparable from most impressions. Yet a mere seventy years ago East Texas almost lost its claim to this sublime forest image, as well as its economic foundations as both a lumber producer and a recreation center. By 1932 most of the long-leaf pine throughout the eastern part of the state and central Texas, plus much of the native hardwood, had been felled, cut into lumber, and shipped throughout North America to supply a decades-long building and furniture boom.

By the time the Great Depression ended this frenzy early in the 1930s, the vast forests of East Texas had nearly disappeared. While conservation of Texas forests had been discussed and envisioned for years, little replanting or erosion control had been practiced following the clear-cutting practices of private lumber companies who viewed forests as non-renewable resources and one-time investments.

Federal government officials debated conservation on public lands for decades before the 1930s. With the support of President Theodore Roosevelt and his chief forester, Gifford Pinchot, early in the 1900s, the powerful Forest Service Bureau of the U.S. Department of Agriculture successfully managed and restored dwindling timber reserves in the far western United States. But Pinchot and his immediate successors inspired only nominal efforts on non-federal lands, including those managed by the fledgling Texas Forest Service, which was founded in 1915 and began acquiring small experimental forests in East Texas in 1924.¹

The earlier federal debate under Theodore Roosevelt exposed a conflict in federal land management between “conservation” and “preservation.” The former was a utilitarian philosophy that called for resources to be used, or conserved if necessary, to provide the greatest benefit for the most people for the longest possible time. The latter philosophy centered on aesthetic preservation and was best exemplified by the handful of national parks, including Yellowstone and Yosemite, carved primarily out of western federal lands and forests prior to Roosevelt’s administration. TR saw merit in both philosophies and officially nurtured both national forests and national parks, particularly the concept of public access and recreation within the park preserves.

When President Woodrow Wilson created the National Park Service in 1916, control of public visitation loomed as one of the new bureau’s greatest challenges. For the next several years federal forest and park interests – one based on conservation philosophy, the other firmly grounded in aesthetic

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preservation – suspended their debates and battles over presidential and congressional favors. The park service developed standard access and preservation practices on its lands and offered to aid state parks agencies in forging similar practices. At the same time, the USDA Forest Service became the national standard setter in its own field of conservation, likewise extending cooperation to state forestry agencies whenever possible.

In Texas this assistance and cooperation took the form of friendly advice from the federal agencies. Since the state included no federal lands, due to the terms of annexation – the former republic's land and debt were retained as joint collateral of statehood – its own institutions best reflected the progressive practices of the federal agencies. The Texas Forest Service exchanged information with the USDA, and the Texas State Parks Board fraternized with the National Park Service through annual meetings of the National Conference on State Parks.²

During the 1920s, the Texas Forest Service, so named after 1926, enjoyed more success than the State Parks Board, created in 1923, in acquiring public land. The state forest service annexed its first two “state forests” in East Texas in 1924 as small conservation demonstration areas, and added a few more over the next several years. In contrast, the legislature's interest in “state parks,” for session after biennial session, consisted mainly of discussions about merging the State Parks Board with the Texas Highway Department or, in at least one study, with the Texas Forest Service.³

These state agency problems of recognition, land acquisition, and funding seemed minor after the New York stock market crash of 1929. The Texas Forest Service could not reverse the effects of failing lumber companies and over-cut lands, and the State Parks Board could only celebrate hollow victories through a handful of designations. In 1931, for example, Senator Margie Elizabeth Neal of Carthage passed a bill that declared all state-owned property *beneath* pine-and-cypress-framed Caddo Lake a “public park,” though without funding or assignment to any particular agency.⁴

By 1932 the economic depression had worsened, and President Herbert Hoover reluctantly cooperated with Congress on direct unemployment relief. That summer Hoover and Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives John Nance Garner of Uvalde agreed that the newly-created Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) should extend extraordinary federal relief funds to state and local governments. Texas Governor Ross Shaw Sterling simply passed these dollars along to county welfare boards, who immediately employed local men on civic projects, including park improvement and tree planting.⁵

Hoover and Sterling, still optimistically expecting the depression to end soon, failed to grasp the potential of federal work relief and its positive effects on a ravaged electorate. At least two eager politicians across the nation understood the gravity: the governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and former governor of Texas, Miriam Amanda Wallace Ferguson. In July, Roosevelt pledged a “new deal” for the American people, based in part on vague references to conservation and employment of youth. In August,

Ferguson drubbed Sterling in the Democratic primary – the only election that mattered in one-party Texas at the time – largely on a platform of supporting Roosevelt's last-ditch solution of massive federal assistance.⁶

Following his election landslide in November, FDR set about defining his program, dispatching Rexford Tugwell to the USDA Forest Service. Tugwell and veteran foresters discussed the creation of a corps of unemployed young men to work on federal lands. Governor Ferguson took office in January 1933 and created the Texas Relief Commission to channel RFC funds to appropriate agencies and prepare for the new president's additional programs. Within two weeks of his inauguration in March, Roosevelt proposed an employment plan for "useful work in forest improvements," and called it the Civilian Conservation Corps.⁷

Rather than create a new federal bureau, Roosevelt directed that the CCC fall under the direction of existing cabinet agencies. As the program was envisioned, the Labor Department would enroll young men aged eighteen through twenty-five, the War Department would gather the recruits at existing Army posts, then send them to work on projects supervised by the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and the Interior Department's new Soil Erosion Service. Forest Service officials quickly argued that work should be authorized beyond federal lands, since some seventy percent of unemployed young men lived east of the Mississippi River and ninety-five percent of the federal domain lay in the Rocky Mountains and western states.⁸

Telegrams flashed from Washington, D.C., to governors across the nation, requesting lists of possible CCC work assignments. Strongly influenced by the Texas Forest Service and other well-organized agencies, Ferguson replied that as many as 120 camps of 200 men each could be assigned to forestry, flood control, and soil erosion projects across the state. Having no federal lands, Texas stood to benefit greatly from the CCC's extension to state and local property as well as certain private tracts of land.⁹

As this vast program gained momentum toward nationwide enrollment of 250,000, Forest Service officials admitted that they did not have the resources to transport so many men to distant work sites. Chief Forester Robert Y. Stuart begged for yet another policy adjustment, and soon Roosevelt granted the Army authority to transport, as well as feed, clothe, and house CCC enrollees in remote camps. With some \$300 million from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the Army also served as paymaster for its charges, supplying a decades-old standard unskilled wage of \$1 per day. Other quick changes to the program brought it in line with the government's progressive forty-hour work week, reserved ten percent of the CCC jobs for unemployed war veterans of any age, and allotted another ten percent to "colored" African American recruits. CCC administrators hired an additional 25,000 "local experienced men," including out-of-work foresters and lumbermen, to direct the work relief projects.¹⁰

"You may be interested to know," CCC director Robert Fechner wrote to Governor Ferguson early in May, "that the President has approved" four forest

projects in Texas. The initial work camps were established on State Forest Number One in Newton County and on three private, cut-over lumber tracts scattered throughout six other East Texas counties. In mid May the *San Antonio Light* described the cooperative efforts of the Army, federal forest administrators, and state forestry officials to open these "first camps for tree army workers in Texas" rapidly.¹¹

The early "tree army" moniker revealed the minor role played by the Interior Department and reflected the low priority Texas placed on state park proposals for its first CCC camps. Although Interior's fledgling Soil Erosion Service, moved to Agriculture in 1935 as the Soil Conservation Service,¹² found a strong reception in CCC planning, the National Park Service initially seemed to play no part in the windfall outdoor labor program. But soon the park service gleefully reignited its old rivalry with the Forest Service. Taking full advantage of that bureau's stumble after its early attempt to dominate the CCC, the National Park Service captured a large CCC quota for its own parklands. Simultaneously, the agency prepared to assist state parks organizations nationwide directly with state-park planning.

Park service officials reviewed a number of potential sites identified by the Texas Relief Commission, since the State Parks Board had not yet awakened to these opportunities. On June 5, Army Reserve Captain Waller K. Boggs, acting for the state and the National Park Service, joined Harrison and Marion county citizens inspecting Caddo Lake. Smitten by the rustic, pine-scented setting, Boggs declared that "nature has provided a park in the rough, and it requires only the hand of man to make it one of the outstanding beauty spots in the Southwest." On June 17, CCC Company 889 arrived at Karnack by train from Fort Sill, Oklahoma. On 468 acres donated by local landowners including Thomas Jefferson Taylor, father of Claudia "Lady Bird" Taylor, the men began work on "SP-1-T," the first official New Deal state park project in Texas.¹³

CCC projects in Texas parks and forests strongly resembled each other, at least in their early development. Work on forest lands included scrub clearing, erosion control, access roads, and the planting of vast areas with loblolly pine, considered an ideal tree for lumber yield in relatively short term of growth. Park work at Caddo Lake and other sites included the same pine-reforestation formula, but with the fast-growing loblolly intended more permanently to shade recreation campgrounds instead of logging camps.

The National Park Service also extended its preservation philosophy to identifying and replanting native species in appropriate places. Landscape architect F.K. McGinnis of Dallas, one of hundreds of professionals hired to guide CCC work in Texas, delivered speeches on the topic to community groups. For Bonham State Park, McGinnis described transplanting "pecans, red oak, red cedar, hackberry and other shrubs as redbud, coralberry, sumac, yucca and many other plants which are ... suitable for carrying out the naturalistic park planting." He added that, at appropriate state parks, "an attempt will be made to get a start of bluebonnets as the bluebonnet is the State Flower."¹⁴

Caddo Lake State Park took years to complete, with CCC work continuing through 1937. The talented enrollees created a recreation icon for the region and conserved an invaluable ecosystem as a public campground and outdoor classroom. As the State Parks Board and National Park Service partnership matured through the 1930s, the CCC developed more than thirty-two state parks, the majority in central and West Texas.

Fortunately other East Texas state park projects followed the Caddo Lake model, with the CCC eventually creating pine-shaded recreation grounds near Daingerfield (1935-1940), Tyler (1935-1941), and Huntsville (1937-1942). State Forest Number Five, or Mission State Forest near Weches in Houston County, received a CCC camp in 1935 whose occupants built a small recreation area and a log-cabin allegory of Mission San Francisco de los Tejas. This state forest was transferred to the parks board in 1957 as Mission Tejas State Park.¹⁵ All of these projects involved replanting and rehabilitating abused pine forests and eroded soils, thus combining conservation efforts with the recreation master plans for each park. These projects seemed small, however, in comparison to others. Between 1935 and 1942 the USDA Forest Service bought and converted abandoned private timber cuts in East Texas into two massive conservation reserves: Davy Crockett National Forest, 161,842 acres in Houston and Trinity counties; and Sam Houston National Forest, 161,508 acres in Montgomery, San Jacinto, and Walker counties.¹⁶ A number of Texas Forest Service facilities received CCC improvements and reforestation efforts as well. In these combined projects the CCC enrollees planted millions of trees, built hundreds of miles of fences and fire breaks, and constructed several rustic public recreation grounds.

Political disputes and land-ownership questions caused CCC camps to come and go from both park and forest projects over the nine-year New Deal era that ended six months after the United States entered the World War II. But the U.S. departments of Agriculture and Interior each carried out ambitious programs with their assigned quotas of CCC companies, and accomplished nothing short of saving the East Texas forests and countless other endangered environments across the nation. The respective state agencies that cooperated with the CCC and federal experts achieved a maturity of management that survives today.

The old intergovernmental rivalry between agencies espousing natural resource conservation and those promoting preservation ultimately benefited Texas and other states. As the federal forest and park services each tried to outdo the other, they ironically discovered recreation as a pursuit common to both their missions. Their roads, buildings, water systems, and sweeping landscape projects share a common rustic appearance built to last indefinitely. And their associated pine-studded landscapes are now inseparable from the forested image of East Texas.

NOTES

¹"The Yale Summer Forestry Camp and Gifford Pinchot," Official Texas Historical Marker file, Texas Historical Commission, 1986; Everett F. Evans and D.A. Anderson, "Texas Forest Service," in Ron Tyler, et al, editors, *The New Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1996) Hereinafter cited as *New Handbook*).

²Dan K. Utley and James W. Stecly, *Guided With A Steady Hand : The Cultural Landscape of a Rural Texas Park* (Waco, 1998), pp. 19, 21-22.

³Griffenhagen and Associates, *The Government of the State of Texas* (Austin, 1933), popularly called the *Griffenhagen Report*; Evans and Anderson, "Texas Forest Service," *New Handbook*.

⁴42nd Legislature, Regular Session, 1931, *Journal of the Senate*, p. 887 (Senate Bill 125).

⁵"Texas Relief Commission Guide for Administering of and Accounting for Relief Funds," 21 March 1933, bulletin at Texas State Archives.

⁶Seth McKay, *Texas Politics, 1906-1944* (Lubbock, 1952), pp. 225-240; Otis L. Graham and Meghan Robinson Wander, *Franklin D. Roosevelt, His Life and Times, An Encyclopedic View* (New York, 1985), p. 97.

⁷Rexford G. Tugwell, *Roosevelt's Revolution: The First Year - A Personal Perspective* (New York, 1977), pp. 7, 78-79.

⁸John A. Salmund, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942, A New Deal Case Study* (Durham, North Carolina, 1967), p. 10.

⁹Miriam Ferguson to Robert Fechner, April 29, 1933, with double-page attachment, "Summary of Texas State Park [sic] and Flood Control Projects Recommended for Emergency Conservation Work," Texas State Archives.

¹⁰James Wright Stecly, *Parks for Texas: Enduring Landscapes of the New Deal* (Austin, 1999), p. 38.

¹¹Robert Fechner to Miriam Ferguson, May 8, 1933, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group 35; "Officers Go To Pick Camp Sites," *San Antonio Light*, May 15, 1933.

¹²Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1958), pp. 342-343.

¹³"Park Site Gets Approval at Camp Caddo," unattributed clipping dated June 6, 1933, from Fred Dahmer scrapbook, Harrison County Historical Commission; various CCC camp rosters from NARA, Record Groups 35 and 79.

¹⁴"Bonham State Park To Be Planted in a Natural Style," unmarked clipping in NPS Inspector Reports, NARA, probably from *Bonham Daily Favorite*, March 14, 1934.

¹⁵Stecly, *Parks for Texas*, pp. 218-219.

¹⁶"Texas Forest Service," in *New Handbook*.