

Conservation corps built characters

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1930s laborers tamed nature, developed skills

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Dobbins Lookout is silent at 6 a.m., as is the rest of South Mountain Park.

To the east, the sun burns the bottom of a few scattered clouds as it climbs toward the horizon.

The white-knuckle drive to reach the 2,300-foot plateau fades away as the vastness and beauty of the landscape take hold.

A leisurely moment in a light-speed world.

Leisurely today, due to the labor that went before — labor that was sweated out in the Great Depression of the 1930s when the Civil Conservation Corps put 3 million people to work developing natural areas, including the road to Dobbins Lookout.

The corps, a New Deal program created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in April 1933, allowed camps to be set up all over the nation. Men ages 17-23 were given a chance to learn honest skills for an honest wage.

In Arizona, the effort led to the planting of 7.5 million trees, the paving of 5,783 miles of forest roads, the erection of thousands of miles of range fencing and the development of recreational sites from the Grand Canyon to the Papago and South Mountain parks.

And the existence of many nostalgic and grateful former workers when the program ended as America entered World War II.

"I was an orphan, and during the Depression, it was hard, hard going," former corps member Manuel Fraijo said.

Manuel, a Phoenix resident, worked at camps at the bottom of Grand Canyon and on the North Rim for 18 months, starting in 1933.

Living quarters consisted of tents, cots and blankets. Entry-level members were paid \$30 a month, \$25 of which was sent directly to dependents. The maximum stay was two years.

Those with ambition could climb to positions of assistant leader, at \$36 a month, and leader, at \$45, and stay a little longer.

All of which was a blessing in the 1930s.

"I have a lot of happy memories from there," Manuel said. "If it hadn't been for the CCC camps, I might have ended up as a drunk or in jail" — a far cry from his actual course in life.

After leaving the corps, Manuel moved around, finding work in smelters, at masonry jobs and cement work. The native of Mexico also became a U.S. citizen in 1940. He went on to put together his own construction company, which built more than 10,000 pool decks in the Valley during 30 years.

He now is retired and, although not physically well, he says at age 75 that he rates his life an "8" on a scale of 1

to 10.

Manuel's brother, Archie, followed in his brother's corps footsteps, serving in the late '30s at camps in Globe and Safford. He was underage, so he lied to get in, he said.

"It was like summer camp up in the mountains," Archie said.

"What we did was build roads and get things ready to fight fires. At that time, we used to have crews all set to go and fight fires at an instant."

Corps workers were administered by the Army and various resource services.

Archie said the Department of Agriculture administered his camp.

"It was everyday life similar to Army life," he said, "except the training was not military. We used Army uniforms, were under Army officers and we did the call to reveille in the morning. Then we went to work."

Archie left the program in 1941.

"The war started," he said. "Unemployment was zero then."

Jerry Ingram of Peoria was a company clerk in Portal, in the southeastern corner of the state, from January 1937 to September 1938.

"All I did was see that they (corps workers) were paid, had a place to sleep and took care of all the records," he said.

Ingram later served three years in the Army and spent 17 years with the Santa Fe railway and the rest of his working career as a teacher. He retired six years ago.

"It changed everyone's life," he said of the corps.

"It gave people the opportunity to make something of their lives. Back in the '30s . . . well it's hard to understand what it was like unless you lived through it

Former corps workers may not be able to make modern America understand those times, but they have found a way for future generations to take note.

Arizona Chapter # of the National Association of Civilian Conservation Corps Alumni plans to unveil a granite monument in Wesley Bolin Plaza on Oct. 20 that is dedicated to Arizona and national corps workers.

The memorial will be the first of its kind in a state capital, chapter President Frank Arcelega said.

Frank is a Navy chief petty officer in Phoenix. His father, Florencio, who now resides in Douglas, was a corps worker at South Mountain in 1937. But he spent most of his stay in the Portal area.

Frank said the family's five children used to gather around as their father would share of stories.

He said his father's words and those of other corps members have a similar ring: "This the best thing that ever happened to me."

The sentiment is inscribed on the bottom of a plaque that will be attached to the monument.

"It depicts exactly what the CCCers felt," Frank said.