

VPR Documentary “Those CCC Boys”

(Delaney) Three quarters of a century is so long in human terms that when Vermont looked for survivors of the original Civilian Conservation Corps, the few had to represent the many. Lanyard Benoit is one of them.

(Benoit) *The CC's was tough. Made men out of us.*

(Delaney) Existing records suggest that more than three million young men served in the CCC across the U-S in the Thirties and the early Forties. It was the first and most popular program of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

(Hughes) *I would like to say that I never have regretted one day that I spent in the CCC.*

(Delaney) Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, as the Great Depression was closing down on the American economy and on the American spirit.

Just weeks into his term the President used a Fireside Chat radio broadcast to outline a shopping list of domestic spending projects. They would define the famous First Hundred Days of his administration.

Item One on that agenda: The Civilian Conservation Corps. Roosevelt's plan was to send young men into the woods to do forestry and flood-prevention work. Enrollees would cut trails, erect fire towers and build roads.

(President Roosevelt) In creating this civilian conservation corps we are killing two birds with one stone. We are clearly enhancing the value of our natural resources, and we are relieving a considerable amount of actual distress. This great group of men has entered upon its work on a purely voluntary basis; no military training is involved, and we are conserving not only our natural resources, but our human resources...

(Delaney) Those human resources were the boys who would grow up to become the Greatest Generation, tempered by depression, tried by war and emerging from both to build a prosperous post-war America.

Paul Hughes says when he was in high school the Corps was his only open door.

(Hughes) I was in my third year of high school along with my friend, who eventually became my brother in law. We both decided we would try the CCC for the summer. It was probably one of the only opportunities for a high school kid to earn any money. And, in those days it was even hard to find a job bicycling for the Western Union, you know, it was, the work wasn't there for kids, or for anybody else for that matter – work was tough.

(Delaney) But when they signed up many enrollees were far from the robust young men portrayed in the posters. Historian Neil Maher teaches at Rutgers University and the New Jersey Institute of Technology. In his book on the CCC, *Nature's New Deal*, he says poor nutrition induced by poverty had taken a toll.

(Maher) They were horribly malnourished, a lot of them hadn't eaten three meals a day in weeks or months, they got there scrawny and weak, they talked about the unhealthiness of their bodies. But through their work in the Corps they began to feel much healthier, rejuvenated, and they talked about that a lot, they were really proud of their bodies, they worked with their shirts off and they felt very proud that they had regained some of their vigor and health.

(Delaney) Within weeks of going to camp the physical change in the young enrollees was so striking that President Roosevelt commented on it for the newsreels:

(1933-National Archives Newsreel) Inspiring his forest army with a personal visit, President Roosevelt makes his first tour of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the Shenandoah Valley....

I wish that I could take a couple of months off from the White House and come down here and live with them because I know that I'd get full of health the way they have. The only difference is

that they've put on an average of about twelve pounds a piece since they got here, and I'm trying to take off 12 pounds. (laughter)

(Delaney) Most of the eventual three million-plus CCC boys came from the teeming cities of America, where their fathers sold apples for a nickel and wore signs that read, "Will work for food."

But, there were country boys in the CCC too, lots of them.

(Benoit) My name is Lanyard Everett Benoit, and I was born in East Berkshire, Vermont. When I enlisted in the CC's, I was 15 years old, and you should have been 17. But I was not the only young man in them CC camps. There were thousands and thousands of young kids that were 15, 16 years old. They come off of farms – the poor people – and that was 30 dollars a month. You got all your medication, your dental work, a good roof over your head, and ripping good meals every day.

(Delaney) Those ripping good meals and thirty dollars a month made good recruiting bait in hard times. So the regimented lifestyle in the camps was not much of an impediment to enrolling for Herbert Hunt.

(Hunt) Living was very similar to going in the army. We had a bugler and they would blow Reveille in the morning, and I know that I got fed

better than my folks could afford to feed me at home... Each of these barracks, I think the WPA built these camps... I think they had metal roofs and there were three coal-burning stoves in each barrack.

(Benoit) Roll call was five o'clock in the morning. You got up, changed your clothes, and then spic-n-span the barracks. Your beds had to be made perfect, you had to be in clean clothes, and then you went to breakfast.

The CC's was tough. Made men out of us. When I came off the farm, I was a strong kid, just like any farm kid. And that hard work was no different to me cutting a tree down or limbing it out and lugging things around. Lugging a jackhammer or anything like that, and it hardened me up and I was tough as boiled leather when I come out of there.

(Delaney) There was an unintended consequence to that toughness. What Roosevelt had done in effect was to pre-recruit an army of millions, put them into military-style living conditions, and teach them to take orders. Historian Neil Maher says all that would become invaluable a few years later.

(Maher) It was amazing, there are some figures that suggest that over ninety per cent of the young men who were enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps later went into the army and went into World War Two . Many of them – having experienced these military-like situations

in these barracks from the Corps – moved into positions of officers and things like that, as World War II started.

(Delaney) Herbert Hunt enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps when he was seventeen years old. He says being a CCC boy was a big plus when he enlisted in the army.

(Hunt) I think the CCC's had a great influence on millions of men, there were millions of men in it. And one of the greatest influences was the training they got, so that when they went in the army, it was very little transition, from living at almost a military life to the army life. It gave me that transition from home to independent living, and it kind of helped make me from a boy to a man, I might say. It matured me.

(Lyford) At that time, we young fellas- you couldn't get a job. The CCC's was a godsend to the young fellows. Take them off the street and everything. Give them something to look forward to...

(Delaney) Within weeks of its launching, the CCC was on movie theatre newsreels all across America.

(Work Camp audio) Here are members of America's jobless army taking to the woods at Camp Roosevelt, and are they happy to get back to work... bugle sounds ...That means eat, and do they go for it!

If an army travels on its stomach, these boys will go a long way ...

The camp is a wonderful physical developer. I wouldn't take five hundred dollars for the experience I'm going through here. It beats "Brother, can you spare a dime..." This is a break, and the first one I've had for a long time.

(Delaney) At the Grand Canyon, Park Ranger Bob Audretsch remembers an old CCC boy who said the Corps saved his life.

(Audretsch) Roy Lemons, who was in the CCC at Grand Canyon said, here I was, seventeen, I'd quit school, I'd never had a job, a regular job, I would go to sleep at night hearing my brothers and sisters crying because they didn't have any food. I had lost all hope in the future, and suddenly there's this opportunity.

(Delaney) Bob Audretsch believes that tourists react positively to his lectures on the CCC because they learn that the Corps transformed its members as well as the landscape they worked on.

(Audretsch) I do programs about the CCC, I've done that for five years now. And the reception by people is just more positive than any other subject I talk about. One hundred twenty five days after Roosevelt's inauguration, two hundred and seventy four thousand boys are working in one thousand three hundred camps. For these young boys, from every state in the nation, to get on a train and maybe go far away took a lot of bravery. And last of all, I think it took a lot of bravery for

the leaders, like Roosevelt, to put their faith in that younger generation, and of course that younger generation proved them right.

(Delaney) The Corps succeeded so well because it did good work on the land, its camps bought about five thousand dollars a month in supplies from nearby towns, and because the enrollees sent money home, twenty five dollars a month out of the thirty they were paid.

In exchange for those dollars, an enormous amount of work got done, all across the United States. There were flood control projects in the East. In fact the biggest single CCC project of all was a series of three dams on a flood-prone river in Vermont.

There were thousands of miles of roads in the forests.

Park Ranger Bob Audretsch does a show-and-tell of CCC works at the Grand Canyon.

(Audretsch) If I was on the rim, the first thing I could do is point down into the Canyon and show people the trail work that they did. Now we couldn't without binoculars see the rest houses, the beautiful rest houses along the trails. In the Grand Canyon village we'll be standing by a beautiful stone wall about a quarter of a mile long, that the CCC did.

(Delaney) Perhaps the single strongest image of the CCC is contained on a poster of two young

men planting a tree. And historian Neil Maher says that reforestation was a key part of the CCC's legacy, but that the Corps' impact on the country was far wider than upgrading the physical landscape.

(Maher) I think what's interesting is, people remember the Corps, the single thing they remember it for is planting trees, they planted almost three billion trees, and that's an impressive feat, but the other things that I think are important is the landscape they left behind, and a lot of this has to do with outdoor recreation. Basically any state or national park you go into now, you are recreating in and on the landscape created by these young men in the 1930's, and that's really a lasting legacy that continues to shape people's experiences in the outdoors, today.

But Maher recalls that not every project the CCC tried was a success. And one of the failures, he says, had to do with a head-on collision of wills between the Corps, and the residents of the back corner of New England.

(Maher) The CCC was scheduled to build a skyline drive across the Green Mountains, the very top ridge of the Green Mountains, and people in Vermont got very upset about this because they thought it would destroy the wilderness quality.

(Delaney) In March of 1936 Vermonters gathered by the thousands in their Town Meetings, and six

out of ten voted “No” to the idea of a road like the Blue Ridge Parkway in the Green Mountains. Historian Neil Maher quotes Breadloaf resident Walter Eaton’s contribution to the debate that preceded that vote.

(Maher) “A CCC gang was put in here to clear up the woods. Before they stopped, the gang had – quote – improved about twenty acres, converting a wild mountain forest into an imitation Central Park.” So what that criticism really did was it made people question what the Corps was really doing. You know, was conservation just about planting trees, or did conservation also entail building roads across the top of the Green Mountains. And if not, how do we have to then rethink what conservation is. And so Vermont had a big role in helping us think about the CCC in a more critical way.

(Delaney) Maher says that sort of critical thinking germinated the seeds of an environmental movement that would flourish decades later.

(Delaney) Almost every Federal and State park everywhere in this country still shows evidence of the CCC’s hard work. In most cases, what was built way back then is still in use today. Lanyard Benoit remembers the beginning of the ski industry.

(Benoit) We helped build the lodge at Mount Mansfield and the first chairlift. Then were shipped over to Waitsfield where we completed Route 17, and I was a driller, there, drilling rock.

But we didn't have earplugs in them days, but we run those hammers for 6,8 hours a day. And I liked it, being a farm boy, I was sick of farmin'. And that was doin' something else. And that's what I enjoyed.

(Delaney) It may have been a change from farm work, but building a road was still hard manual labor, as Paul Hughes remembers.

(Hughes) And that was hard work because we were using a shovel, pick and shovel, and lugging stone, and doing, you know a little bit of everything that you would do on a construction job.

(Delaney) The country is still committed to the kind of protection for the outdoor world that flourished in the Civilian Conservation Corps so long ago. In fact in many places there are successor groups that do the same kind of physical work on trails and other outdoor assets.

Park Ranger Laura Cohen is the chief interpreter at Prince William Forest Park in Virginia, site of the national 75th anniversary celebration for the CCC. She says continuing the work of the original Corps is still popular in modern America, because the CCC was just the right program at just the right time.

(Cohen) In some ways it's a matter of a generation of people that now had their hands in the earth of America. They transformed so much of our relationship to the natural environment and

our historical environment, those things that we identify with making us Americans.

It wasn't just a work program, it wasn't just a way for people to get money to send home to their families. They also felt that they were having an impact on the future of America.

And if you can combine those two things, getting paid during the Great Depression, which was a really good thing for a lot of people, and also having an impact and having a purpose and a mission. So I think it went beyond people just considering it as work. They really connected to the mission of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

(Delaney) Laura Cohen thinks that mission lives on in successor organizations that sprang up after Congress stopped funding the CCC early in World War Two.

(Cohen) *It's more true than ever that youth need to, and are encouraged to get out and take part in conservation projects across the country. The Vermont Youth Conservation Corps is a great example of the continuation of the Civilian Conservation Corps legacy.*

There are other programs across the country like the Student Conservation Association and National Public Lands Day that encourage youth to get out and get their hands in the dirt of America.

(Delaney) It would be wrong to tie too tight a knot between the old CCC and its modern successor organizations.

Nick Caputa is a Youth Conservation Corps veteran from Vermont. At a Corps gathering, he said there are stark contrasts in who joins these days, and why.

(Caputa) During the time the CCC came out, it was the Great Depression, I mean, I remember hearing the story of the farm family with several kids, they sent 'em off to the CCC cause they couldn't afford to take care of them, couldn't feed them. It was a necessity then. The VYCC is more about leadership and imparting some of these skills, but it's not the necessity, there's not the urgency, and I guess that's what ties the CCC boys together, is the fact that it was this shared struggle, you know, the struggle of the Depression, the struggle of World War II.

(Delaney) Casper Lyford's CCC memories include being on a Vermont mountainside during one of the worst natural disasters of the 1930s.

(Lyford) And I went through the '38 hurricane. There was a fire tower up there and the family lived up there. And the ranger and his family came down the hill and he says sonny you better get outta here. He'd no more than said it and down went the tower. What a crash!

The next morning the superintendent put me in charge of the men to cut our way back towards Burke Mountain. It took all the forenoon and part of the afternoon, cause we didn't have no chainsaws back then. We had crosscuts and axes, crosscut saws and axes.

(Delaney) Enrollees in modern Youth Conservation Corps do the same kind of work as their grandfathers might have done seven decades ago. But they are motivated by a quest for leadership skills and a taste of the outdoor life, rather than by need and by hunger. And yet, on an individual basis, the experience seems to have the same effect on the young as on the old CCC boys.

(Jackson) I'm studying outdoor education at Johnson State College and this is actually the third crew I'm on, and I just love making friends and meeting people who are as enthusiastic about the environment as I am.

(Delaney) The impressions of Mark Jackson, whose Youth Conservation Corps memories are newly etched and still bright. But will they last? Will those images glimmer down through the years as clearly as the ones cherished by the CCC originals?

(Hughes) I would like to say that I never have regretted one day that I spent in the CCC.

(Delaney) Paul Hughes is now 89 years old.

(Hughes) I learned to get along with people, and I think it was a great education for me. I learned a lot.

(Benoit) When I think back to my CC days I figure they were the happiest days of my life.

(Delaney) And Lanyard Benoit is 84.

(Benoit) I enjoyed the companionship I had with the boys, and it was good. I miss the foresters that worked, the state foresters that worked with us. Many times, I'll go back to the old CC camp, and just sit down in there and just look around and remember. I have, you know, a lot of memories when I was there as a boy.

(Maher) It's amazing how proud these men are.

(Delaney) Again, historian Neil Maher:

(Maher) I've interviewed a lot of these men for my book and I've also been to a lot of conferences where these men speak. And they are so proud of the work they did, and as are the people who go to these places today. People know about the CCC, it's probably the one program from the New Deal that people remember and know about, and that's partly because people still use a lot of the structures that the CCC built.

(Delaney) Seven decades after those structures were built, the modern stewards of the nation's parks and forests are still stunned by the long-ago transformation of both the American landscape, and of the young men who made those changes. Again, Virginia Park Ranger Laura Cohen:

(Cohen) There is really no way to measure the impact that the Civilian Conservation Corps had on our state, local and National parks. But in terms of their craftsmanship and their dedication to their craftsmanship, and the fact that these

were largely unskilled laborers coming from the streets of urban areas across America ... through this Civilian Conservation Corps program a generation of men was transformed into craftsmen, and were given a certain connection to what it meant to be an American. I think that that's what really connects to the CCC with me.

(Delaney) For many people in this country, it's hard times all over again, which raises the questions, should we revive the CCC, and could we do it?

Most of the experts say, probably not. 75 years ago, the crisis was far more dire, and people were far more willing to let the government be the solution, than they are now. So while a new CCC would probably be good for the land, and for the participants, politically it's almost impossible to re-create.

(Delaney) The old CCC boys took on the Depression, and the greatest armed conflict in world history, and they won. They are the leading edge of the greatest generation, and their achievements migrate from fact to legend as they leave the stage.

Nobody knows how many CCC boys are still alive, or how many of them have told their stories.

Everyone hopes to leave a sign that his or her life has mattered, a footprint perhaps. The old CCC boys, and the rest of us, need not look too far to

find those prints. They're plain to see in parks and forests all across America.

I'm Steve Delaney.

(Voice) "Those CCC Boys" is a production of Vermont Public Radio.

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For more information about the 75th anniversary of the Corps and to see photos go to VPR.net.