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Call Number: F417.D7 D73 v.20-25 2005-10

Journal Title: Drew County historical journal.

Article Author: Lampkin, Sheila
Article Title: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Drew County: Memories of Camp Monticello

Journal Vol: 21 Journal Issue:
Journal Month: Journal Year: 2006
Article Pages: 29-36

OCLC: 15069781

Branch Location: Arkansas Collection -- photocopy

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The Civilian Conservation Corps in Drew County:

Memories of Camp Monticello

by Sheilla Lampkin

The Civilian Conservation Corps was one of the most popular of the Depression-era federal programs. The CCC or the C's, as it was more familiarly called, created military-style camps and put young men to work in forestry-related jobs.

At the time Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933, the unemployment rate ran as high as 25 percent of the labor force. Roosevelt initiated a series of programs that were intended to put the country back on its feet. These programs made up Roosevelt's "New Deal."

On March 31, 1933 Roosevelt signed legislation creating the Emergency Conservation Work program. Eventually known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), this program had two objectives: to create work and jobs for the unemployed, and to save America's natural resources through flood control, soil conservation and reforestation projects. The Departments of Agriculture and the Interior were charged with choosing locations for the camps while the Department of Labor selected the enrollees. The Department of War built and operated the CCC camps.

The earliest camps were "tent cities," but these facilities eventually included barracks, mess halls, recreation buildings, infirmaries, living quarters for administrators, education buildings, tool sheds and garages.

Initially, enrollment in the CCC program was limited to single, physically sound unemployed young men between the ages of 18 and 25. However, the program was eventually expanded to include Native Americans, World War I veterans and "local experienced men" who acted as technical assistants at the camps. Each recruit received clothing, shelter, bedding, toiletries, food, training, medical care and $30 per month. From this pay $22 a month was sent home to his family to provide some financial support.

At its peak in September 1935 the CCC operated 2,514 camps with a total of 502,000 men throughout the country. In Arkansas there were 64 camps employing 13,000 men. The first camps in Arkansas were in the Ouachita and Ozark National Forests. Other camps worked on state park projects at Petit Jean, Mount Nebo, Crowley's Ridge, and Devil's Den. However most Arkansas CCC camps worked on small local projects involving soil conservation and reforestation.

The Civilian Conservation Corps ended on July 31, 1942, lasting nine years and four months. The war made the program unnecessary. The Arkansas camps had employed 62,882 men. In major projects the young men planted almost 20,000,000 trees, laid approximately 7,000 miles of telephone lines and built nearly 5,300 miles of trails and roads. Equally important was

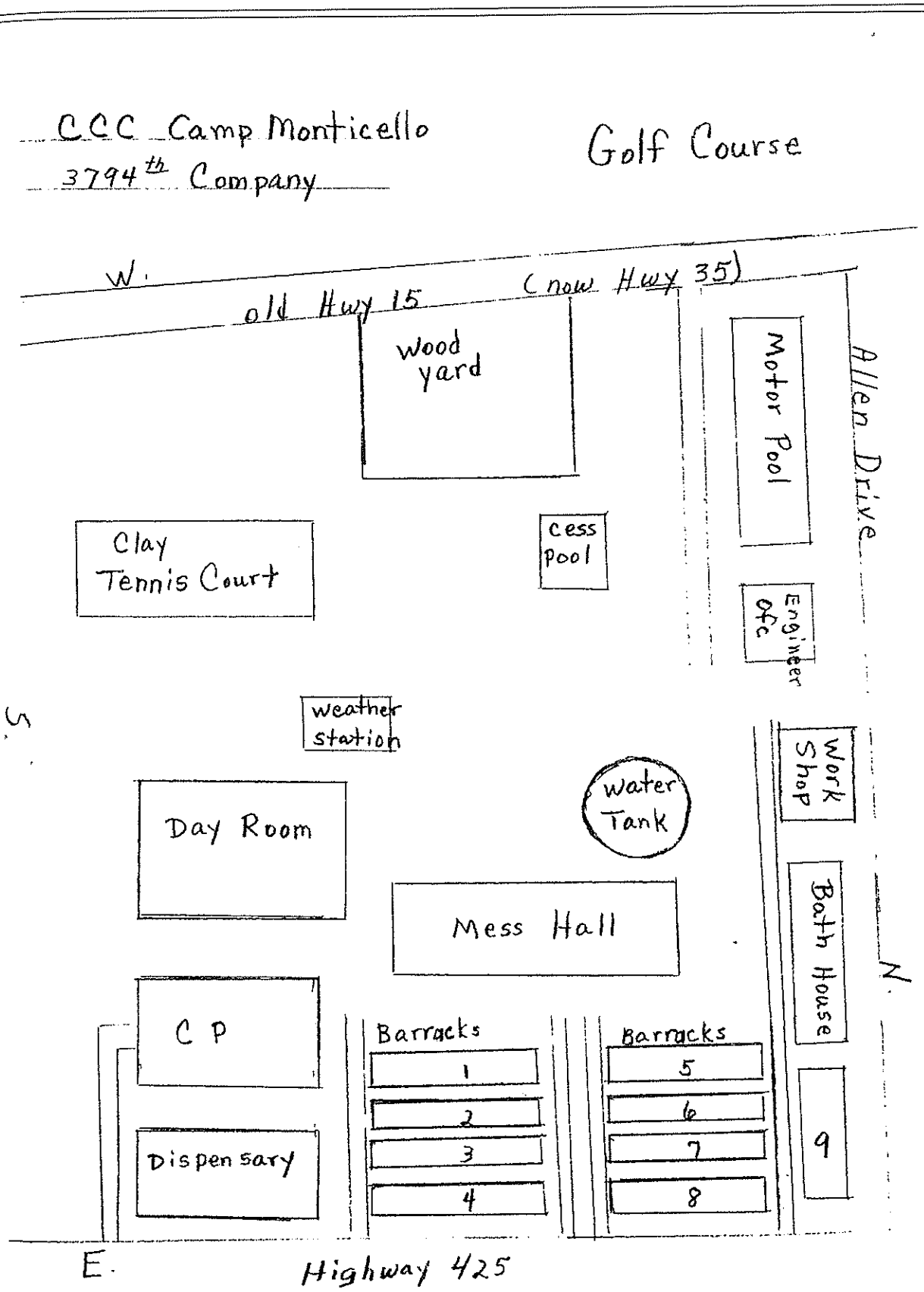
the approximate $17,000,000 in income provided to Arkansas families.

A CCC camp was established in the Monticello area on June 26, 1935. Known as the 3794th CCC Company, it began with 14 men and three truckloads of supplies sent from the Warren camp under the leadership of Lieutenant M.B. Eagle and Medical Officer E.O. Harper who had the job of examining and inoculating the new recruits. The campsite was established in a wooded area between U.S. Highway 425 North and State Highway 35 West. This site occupied land in the vicinity of the Bennie Ryburn home, much of which now belongs to Ron Echols of Monticello. For several months tents provided barracks and work areas for 217 men, but by October the tents had been replaced with substantial permanent barracks. This was fortunate as the winter of 1935-36 was a harsh one in the county. Initially the biggest problems at the camp were the mosquitoes and chiggers in the wooded area. Once the underbrush was cleared away much of this pest problem was eliminated. However, a meningitis outbreak in November 1935 resulted in a two-week quarantine of the camp.

Enrollees could continue their schooling in the Monticello camp. The camp had its own schoolhouse and those desiring higher education could attend Arkansas A & M College on a part-time basis. The CCC camp had its own mimeographed monthly newsletter, providing news of the local camp and other Arkansas camps, and containing information about entertainment available in Monticello or in the camp's recreation hall.

Carl Wherry was one Monticellonian whose memories are so vivid that he created a diagram of the camp area. Carl joined the CCC on April 11, 1939 on his twenty-first birthday. A native of Warren, Arkansas, he received $30 monthly, but $21 from this amount was sent home. Wherry remembers the camp and its location along the highway, the infirmary, the recreation hall, mess hall, tool shed, motor pool, and barracks. There was a store at the camp called a canteen. It was a combination of store, pool hall and recre-

The road that entered the camp as seen today. The old camp site occupies a residential area, though part of the site is overgrown.



May drawn by Carl Wherry and enhanced by Deloris Cornelius

ation center. The canteen kept credit books and guys could borrow on next month's pay if they ran short of funds. CCC recruits were supplied with blue denims as work clothes and khakis to wear to the mess hall and canteen.

The men built a clay tennis court on the southern edge of the camp that was as hard as concrete, where they learned to play the game. Another CCC alumnus recalls a baseball field behind (west) of the tennis courts. Teams from nearby communities such as New Hope and Green Hill, would come and play on Sunday afternoons. Later they would make and serve ice cream.

The nine barracks buildings bordered U.S. Highway 425 North. Eight barracks served the young recruits while the ninth barracks building housed the college crews. Fifty men were quartered in each unit. Wherry lived in Barracks No. 4. Once during an influenza epidemic, all the sick were gathered in Barracks No. 2 and Wherry was put in charge with instructions to give each one a glass of water every hour. One night Carl employed a relief man to take his place. This man chewed tobacco and was regarded as a very tough character. The next morning the sick men begged Wherry to get the relief man out of there. He'd waked them up *every* hour and *made* them drink a glass of water! But everyone recovered.

Carl recalled the camp was built in a previously heavily wooded area. There were many big stumps left standing. When any corpsman was subject to punishment, the first sergeant would assign him a stump to be removed. And he couldn't leave camp until the stump was dug out of the ground. This was one method of discouraging rule infractions. The camp included a bathhouse and a shop full of woodworking tools on the north side of the camp. Wherry made his mother a rolling pin in the wood shop. Also nearby was a weather station where the temperatures were recorded and filed in the camp office every day.

There were sidewalks around the camp laid out with two-by-fours. The designated spaces were filled with gravel and soaked with oil. When hardened, the oil-soaked gravel made a solid and lasting walkway. Traces of these sidewalks remain and are defined by daffodils blooms in the spring. All the landscaping done at the camps was done with shovels, not hoes.

A ditch ran through the campsite near the motor pool. The grease and oil changed from the trucks would run down to that area. A sump or cesspool was installed to catch the used oil and keep it from entering the stream. Even then the boys were trying to protect the environment.

Wherry worked on the Kulbeth place near Wilmar and on another job down State Highway 35 West on the Drew County line. The CCC boys cut or dug sod and cleared trees from pastureland. Some of the felled timber was hauled to the camp wood yard to be split on rainy days for their winter fires. Carl worked near the county line under the leadership of foreman J.A. Hughes, father of former county judge Dale Hughes. Hughes was a quiet sort of man but a fair boss and a great guy. Other foremen included Messrs. Lloyd and Fraser. Once during a meal, Carl found a worm in his turnip greens. He told Hughes about it, who cautioned Wherry "to be quiet or he might have to fight for the piece of meat!"

In the middle of the summer 1940 Wherry was asked to transfer to a CCC camp in Utah as sergeant. He agreed to go and joined a CCC group in Utah near Provo. Shortly thereafter he was drafted for military service. Since he wanted to have a choice in his branch of service, Wherry enlisted in the Air Corps. This ended his experiences in his CCC career and the beginning of his experiences in World War II.

Willard Clampitt of Monticello also recalls fond memories of his CCC camp days. Clampitt grew up in the Prairie Grove community in southeastern Drew County. He says that many young men applied at the local draft board office to join the CCC because of the guaranteed salary at a time when jobs were nearly nonexistent. Eighty boys tried to join when he did and he was the only one called. Even then he was only selected as an alternate on the chance that someone else declined to participate. This did occur and Clampitt became part of the CCC camp on April 14, 1939. Two days later a tornado struck the Center Point community, killing twenty-one people. Clampitt and some of his fellow CCC boys went out to help clear the roads to the church where eleven died.

CCC workers arose at 6:00 a.m. and ate breakfast at 7. By 8:00 they were driven in trucks to their job sites to begin work. Lunch was delivered about 1:00 p.m. and work continued until 4:00 when the corpsmen were again brought back to camp. The evening meal was served at 6:00. Willard remembers that the food at the mess hall was good — and there were three meals a day. Bed check was at 10:00 p.m. and according to army routine the boys were required to

make their own beds. While the men were allowed to go home on weekends, they had to be back by 10:00 p. m. Sunday night. After supper at the mess hall the young men could go to the recreation hall or go to town by walking or hiring a taxi. A taxi ride to Monticello's town square cost twenty-five cents and groups of five men would often pool their cash for a taxi ride to town. It only cost each one a nickel!

Clampitt recalls one particularly difficult work project while he was with the Civilian Conservation Corps. Kelly Wilson, who lived south of Monticello, owned a pond that leaked water. The CCC boys were sent out to fix it. They spent several muddy, eight-hour days there. The young men dug a trench four feet deep around the pond to the bottom of the levee. Every day they'd have to dip water out of the trench before they could continue work. When the trench was finally completed it was filled with clay, which seemed to stop the leak.

Other projects included building terraces on hilly land to prevent erosion. Many of these terraces are still visible today in the area. Much of Clampitt's time with the CCC was also spent setting out pine seedlings in reforestation projects. The tree farmers marked rows eight feet apart and the young seedlings were set out by hand. Tree planting was monotonous and tiring. One day while planting trees near Star City the young men became especially tired and on the way back to camp they threw out the extra plants, thinking they wouldn't have to return the next day. However men in the truck behind them saw the boys throwing the tree seedlings into the ditch and reported it to camp officers. Since no one on the truck would squeal on the guilty ones, every man was punished by having to dig one of the stumps out of the camp grounds.

Later Willard applied for the job of truck driver. Walter Cox gave the qualifying test for the job. The

Camp Monticello in a rare photograph. Notice the CCC sign in the center

test's only requirement was to put the vehicle in reverse and "back up" Gaster Hill! As truck driver Clampitt transported the laborers to the work site, helped serve the hot lunches brought from the camp, and take the men back to camp after the day's work was done.

While the regular length of service in the CCC program was supposed to be two years, Clampitt left in June of 1940. His father had obtained a logging contract from Georgia Pacific and Willard was needed at home to drive a truck. It took a couple of months to secure his release from the program and return to work in the family timber business. When the United States entered the war in 1941, Clampitt tried to enlist but failed because of his poor vision. He remained in the timber business until he retired.

Lawrence Allen of Monticello was also a Civilian Conservation Corps alumnus who remembers his time in the Monticello camp. Allen applied in 1938 to earn money to help his parents keep the farm during the severe drought and dark days of the Great Depression. He signed up to join at the local draft board and was fortunate enough to be accepted immediately. Allen says that the camps were organized and operated like a military installation. Every morning began with breakfast at the mess hall and a formation at the flagpole. Then the young men were loaded in trucks and carried to work sites. Lawrence spent a year with the group and remembers that he mostly helped clear land for farmers, spending eight-hour workdays during five-day weeks. He remembers hauling many trees that had been cut from the land back to camp to be used as firewood to heat the barracks. The rest of the cleared timber was rowed and burned in the fields.

Later Allen was assigned to an engineering crew. This job was easier than clearing timber. He helped engineers survey and mark the terraces for the CCC boys to build for erosion control. Farmers often supplied the mules and teams to help in this work.

Most of the CCC officers were local men. Before the end of his CCC experience Allen became a major's orderly, assigned to keep his quarters clean and wait on him.

Lawrence was still in the CCC when the camp was moved to Warren. The camp there was again set up in tents west of the old Bradley mill site. Later the men built permanent barracks. Allen fondly recalls those CCC days as good experience teaching him how to get along and interact with others, along with military discipline.

Another Monticellonian, Benson Byrd also participated in the CCC program. Benson actually joined the corps in 1937 in Magnolia, Arkansas. He was sent directly to the Monticello camp and a week passed before he was able to write his parents and tell them of his whereabouts. Byrd describes his CCC experiences as an adventure for a country boy who had never been more than 50 miles from home. Although he remembers the CCC camps as being much like the army, he says he loved every minute of it.

At first assigned to a work crew, Byrd helped to clear land and build ponds in the area behind the Annswood Apartments for a Mr. Smith. He worked in Lincoln County and at Wilmar on a land-clearing project with his good friend John Collins.

Shortly thereafter Benson got to work in the kitchen when he volunteered for K.P. (Kitchen Police) duty. He says he wanted to be near the "eats." First Cook James Shook took a liking to Byrd, removed him from K.P. duty, and reassigned Benson to the job of camp pastry chef. In that position he earned $36 a month. Byrd's workday began at 3:00 a.m. and he began to cook on a large-scale basis under the tutelage of Shook. He soon learned to make nearly 40 pies at a time or 500 doughnuts for breakfast. Benson later worked his way up to First Cook at a salary of $45 a month. In that job he worked 12-hour shifts. Going on duty at 3:00 a.m., he'd be on duty for 24 hours and then off for 24 hours. This long duty schedule was a necessity because the cooks had to be able to feed the crews at any time. If the men were fighting a fire and came in at 2:00 a.m., a meal had to be ready to serve. The kitchens were open all year long, including holidays, and the K.P. had the job of cleaning the kitchens after meals! Byrd worked in the kitchen a year as pastry chef and four months as head cook.

Since most of the foodstuffs were contracted by the Army and trucked in, the day came when no food was on hand because the trucks hadn't arrived. A tense situation developed and the work crews went on strike. The cook told them he only had bread and peaches. After much heated discussion the men decided to eat the bread and peaches, and the impasse was resolved.

Byrd remained in Camp Monticello for almost two years, managing to complete the requirements for his

high school diploma during that time. Benson contracted pneumonia in 1938 and went to the Army-Navy Hospital in Hot Springs for six weeks.

He also got married while in the CCC and had to keep it as quiet as possible for fear of dismissal since single men only could serve in the corps. Byrd left the CCC looking for a more permanent job and began work at the Drew Cotton Mill. When that job also ended, Byrd farmed until he joined the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1940. The WPA was another New Deal program designed to provide jobs. The WPA built many bridges and other public projects throughout the nation. While working for this agency, Benson worked on a bridge crew for three months under foreman Guy Burks.

John Collins also served in the CCC camp in Monticello. Collins served for 18 months in 1937-38. He remembers the initiation he received when he first went in, and the fellows lining the gauntlet who had brass tipped belts. John began working on a crew that cleared land and planted pine trees, leaving meadows among them. He also worked with a crew putting in phone lines to a fire tower that the Arkansas Forestry Commission had built in the Coleman community.

While serving in the CCC, Collins contracted a case of measles and was sent to the infirmary. Here he developed a friendship with the medical officer, Lieutenant Nolton Lieberman. Lieberman asked Collins if he'd like to stay and work in the infirmary and Collins agreed. He spent the remainder of his CCC days there. John said that while he worked in the infirmary, the cough syrup had to be kept under lock and key because of its alcohol content and the tendency of young men in the camp to search out this type of beverage.

Collins recalls that he had a lot of fun while in the CCC camp with members playing track and pranks on each other. Wrestling matches were common in the barracks. All the bed mattresses would be placed in the center of the hall and bouts staged in this makeshift ring.

With the money withheld from his paycheck and sent to his family, Collins was able to purchase a nice Model A automobile. He kept it out in the woods until weekends. Then he'd haul some of his buddies home to the Garrett Bridge area for help with gas money. Collins' service in the CCC came to an end when he decided to get married. The Civilian Conservation Corps was designed for single men and getting married disqualified him. When the commander, Captain Ned Woodman, learned of Collins' marriage, he was called into the office. Rather than a prompt dismissal, Collins was allowed six more months of service before he was discharged. John returned home to Garrett Bridge to farm. He too feels that one great asset of the CCC program was that he learned to get along with others, many from different places and backgrounds.

Kermit Moss also served in the CCC camps. His experiences are somewhat different because he did not serve in Camp Monticello. A native of New Edinburg, Arkansas, Moss began his CCC experience at the camp at Jackson Hill near Fordyce in 1937. Because he had a high school education and was proficient in writing and spelling, he was given the job of company clerk and a promotion to assistant leader with a salary of $36 per month. Then Moss was shown a typewriter that he was expected to use! The resourceful young man soon discovered another typewriter and instruction manual in the education building. He practiced diligently until he became a fairly proficient typist.

Kermit's CCC group moved to a camp at Magnolia and he was promoted to Using Service Clerk and made a leader at $45 a month. Moss recalls he also practiced his barbering skills developed earlier while training on his brother John at home. But most of his CCC customers couldn't pay the haircut fee. Then his camp moved again to Everton near Harrison, Arkansas. There his barbering skills were noticed and Moss obtained a barber's license through the efforts of foreman C.J. Duhon.

Near the end of his three-year term of service, Kermit went to Harrison and took a civil service examination to qualify as a clerk typist. He passed and was offered a job in Lake Village working for the Farm Security Administration. He earned $1,440 a year in this job, and it also provided him with an opportunity to work in an office with about twelve female typists.

One day Moss' supervisor called him aside to say he would like to promote him to the position of office manager. The only problem was the fact that the job required some accounting skills. Before long Kermit was taking an accounting course by correspondence from the International Accountants Society in

Chicago, Illinois. Soon he was ready to go to Little Rock and take an examination for junior auditor.

After he passed the exam Kermit returned to Lake Village and was appointed office manager at a salary of $1,800 a year. He was now in charge of those same twelve girls with whom he'd been working previously! His boss gave him some excellent advice for that situation. He said, "If you give one of them a pencil, give them all a pencil!" Sound advice indeed!! Kermit's experiences in clerking and accounting in the CCC program also pointed him in the direction of his life's work.

Moss enlisted in the Army Air Corps at the start of World War II and was eventually sent to Burma. While serving in Burma he finished the correspondence course in accounting and passed his final examination before an Army Air Corps attorney. Moss was rewarded with a card from the International Accountants Society showing that he had passed his test "somewhere in Burma." He still proudly carries that card today. After the war Kermit enrolled in the University of Michigan and earned a degree in accounting. His life's work began in the CCC camps and he has never looked back.

On a recent bright, sunny day, Benson Byrd, Billy Mhoon, and the writer made a trip to the site of the old CCC camp. The lush, green woods yielded only a few small and silent reminders of the long gone camp. A new road follows the path of an older entrance into the camp. During the early days of the camp a wood yard sat in the area near State Highway No. 35. We found a 10x10 concrete slab that probably held some sort of building for the wood yard about 50 yards north of the highway. It sat just west of the old motor pool.

Before we reached the small creek bed we found a partial foundation of a rather large building which may have been the old motor pool garage. Further up the hill and hidden in the underbrush were the four pillars that held the water tower. Concrete remnants of the old bathhouse and its sewer drain were also in evidence. The locations of the mess hall or barracks were not found however, because private homes now occupy the areas where they were located. Along the former southern border of the camp the entrance gate with its old metal posts is still in place along with fencing remnants.

Walking among the woodlands that were cleared for the CCC camp, but have now been reclaimed by the forest again stirred many happy memories for Mr. Byrd and many questions and imaginings for Mr. Mhoon.

Conceived by a compassionate president and public servant as a means of providing much needed jobs and income in one of America's darkest periods economically, the Civilian Conservation Corps succeeded far beyond its original goals.

The program not only bettered the environment in Arkansas and the rest of the nation, but it provided funds for their families' survival while offering educational opportunity and training for young men desiring, or lacking these skills.

The New Deal, however, did not end the Depression. World War II finally brought the economy back to prosperity. The CCC camps offer a rare glimpse into American during the Depression decade.

Author's note: The main source of information for this article was interviews with Carl Wherry, Benson Byrd, Lawrence Allen, Willard Clampitt and John Collins that were conducted during the summer of 2006. Kermit Moss graciously put down his detailed recollections in a letter, and Carl Wherry provided a hand drawn map of the camp (enhanced by Deloris Cornelius). Also of value was the *1937 Official Annual of the Arkansas District Civilian Conservation Corps — Seventh Corps Area* — loaned by Billy Calhoun of McGehee and Benson Byrd of Monticello. Jan Jenkins' article, "The CCC in Drew County: Roosevelt's Tree Army and Camp Monticello," included in the 1995 issue of the *Drew County Historical Journal*, provided much background information on the CCC camps. My thanks also go to Ron Echols and Tom White for permission to walk their property on which the camp was located, and to Billy Mhoon and Benson Byrd for accompanying me on our exploratory trek through the CCC camp grounds. This article is dedicated to memory of the late Carl Wherry.