



## ROOSEVELT'S TREE ARMY

On May 2, 1933, two hundred young men from Detroit arrived at an isolated spot in the Hiawatha National Forest, west of Sault Ste Marie. They set up tents and called the area Camp Raco. Within months many similar camps were scattered across northern Michigan.

The Civilian Conservation Corps had come to Michigan.

During the early 1930s, the nation's economy bottomed out, leaving millions of workers unemployed. In New York, Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced a program where unemployed men worked for the government planting trees. When he became president, Roosevelt proposed a similar program called the Civilian Conservation Corps.

President Roosevelt believed the Civilian Conservation Corps, also called the CCC, would improve the economy and help the needy. He also thought the CCC would return the country to its "former beauty" and allow the unemployed to work in "healthful surroundings." In Michigan between 1933 and 1942, thousands of young Michiganders worked to restore the land that loggers had left behind.

### "CCCs"

Most of the men who enrolled in the CCC were between seventeen and twenty-three years old. They were unmarried, unemployed, and not in school. They were in good health and capable of doing physical labor.

The nicknamed "CCCs," each received a set of clothes including shoes, socks, underwear, a blue denim work suit, and old army uniform for dress purposes. They also received a shaving kit, a towel, a mess kit, a steel cot, a cotton mattress, and bedding. Enrollees were paid \$30 a month. Each man kept 5 dollars and had to send 25 dollars home to help support his family.

CCC camps began as tent cities. As winter approached, they built permanent structures. These camps included several barracks, a mess hall, a bathhouse and latrine, and other service buildings. The simple buildings had electricity, but poor lighting.

The U.S. Army helped run the CCC, but there was no military drill or discipline. Enrollees began their day with reveille at 6:00am. Calisthenics were followed by breakfast. The men spent the day working. They returned to camp in the late afternoon where they either attended classes or visited nearby communities. Lights were out at 10:00 PM

## Forests and Rivers

The CCC worked in national and state forests. They planted seedlings and worked to end tree diseases. The CCCers fought forest fires and built roads, trails, towers, and firebreaks to prevent forest fires. In 1936, the CCC fought massive fires on Isle Royale in western Lake Superior. According to one observer, without the efforts of the CCC, “some of the finest scenic spots on the island would have been laid bare.”

The CCC improved hundreds of miles of Michigan’s best fishing rivers and streams, conducted many wildlife projects, and worked to improve Michigan’s state parks.

## Recreation

Being in the CCC wasn’t all work. Enrollees had a chance to finish their high school diplomas or take college classes. The camps also had their own sports teams. According to one observer, the Camp Manistique baseball team “played high class baseball.” CCCers at Camp Walkersville held weekly boxing matches that drew crowds of hundreds of area residents. The camp sent one of its members to fight in the Golden Gloves Tournament in Chicago. Camp Escanaba River enrollees had an orchestra that performed on the local radio station.

## The End of an Era

The Civilian Conservation Corps disbanded in June 1942. Nationally, more than three million men joined the CCC. More than 100,000 young men joined the Michigan CCC. They planted almost 500 million trees – more than twice as many as any other state. They developed Isle Royale National Park and the Seney National Wildlife Refuge, revitalized the Michigan State Park system, and sent 20 million dollars home to families.

The CCC improved the morale, health, and education of many young men. It also gave them some military experience that benefited those men who joined the armed forces during World War II.

President Roosevelt once noted, the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps received the admiration of the entire country. Today, the efforts of the CCC can still be seen and enjoyed in Michigan’s state parks and national forests.