

Camp Roosevelt — Home Away from Home

Camp Roosevelt was the very first Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp in the nation! It was located in the George Washington National Forest and was therefore designated as Camp NF-1. (NF stands for National Forest, the “1” means it was the first National Forest camp). Even though it was located in Fort Valley on the Massanutten Mountain, it had an Edinburg mailing address. Edinburg was the nearest train depot to the camp and the Ft. Valley Post Office hadn’t been established. The Civilian Conservation Corps was the dream of President Franklin Roosevelt who wanted to provide jobs for the young men of this nation during the Great Depression. The program that he developed was a result of the “Emergency Conservation Work” legislation and it was signed into law on March 31, 1933. This federal government program soon became known as the Civilian Conservation Corps.



The first CCC “boys” arrived at Camp Roosevelt on April 17, 1933. Included in that group was Henry Rich, the very first CCC enrollee. On the way up the mountain, one of their busses broke-down and they actually had to walk the rest of the way up the mountain. When they arrived at the camp site, they were greeted with nothing more than a clearing in the forest. Among the first duties for this group of 200 young men was setting up tents for their own shelter and digging latrine (toilet) pits. Then it rained, a lot! The entire cleared area where the Camp was to be built was a lake of mud. This was a very challenging beginning for these first 200 CCC boys. Gradually the former “lake of mud” looked like a true camp. Barracks were built for the men to sleep in, a mess hall was constructed for dining, and decent outhouses and showers were built for their use. Other buildings in the camp housed tools. The U.S. Army men that ran the camp, and the Camp Superintendent, Jim Wilkins, planned and supervised the daily projects.

Even during these first few difficult days, a certain spirit grew within these CCC’ers that would follow them, and the entire CCC organization throughout its history. A slogan developed within the camp that helped to carry them through these hard times. When the times got tough, the CCC Boys could be heard saying in unison “We Can Take It!” This slogan meant that whatever the problems they faced, they would meet the challenge with good spirit and hard work. This inner spirit, discovered within themselves, was a remarkable turning point in their lives. Many of these young men, just weeks before, had been wandering the streets of Baltimore, Washington and Philadelphia with no job, no money, and for some, no food. They were all victims of the Great Depression and they would soon find out that the CCC would be their moral and physical savior.

The boys arose at 6:00 AM every day to the sounds of a bugler playing reveille. Then it was off to the mess hall for a hearty breakfast and out to the woods to do various conservation projects led by Superintendent Jim Wilkins. The CCC Boys earned \$30.00 a month for their work, \$25.00 of their pay was sent back home to their families. They were allowed to keep only \$5.00 of their pay each month. The CCC boys would work until 4:30 PM when they headed back to camp. They would then take a shower and dress for dinner. Before dinner, the bugler would blow “retreat” at which time the Boys would gather in formation around the flag pole and the U.S. Flag was lowered for another day. The Boys always had good food to eat and plenty of it. Quite often the cook would buy local fruit, vegetables and meat from area farmers to feed the CCC’ers. After dinner, the Boys had time for sports, reading or education. Camp Superintendent Jim Wilkins taught many of these CCC enrollees how to read and write. They also were allowed to study other subjects like math, surveying and forestry. At about 9:30 PM it was “lights-out” and that signaled the end of another wonderful day at Camp Roosevelt.

The Boys did not realize at the time that the CCC was indeed going to be one of their best lifetime adventures. The Corps made them physically fit, well fed, healthy and disciplined. It prepared them for an even greater challenge looming in all of their futures.....World War II.

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