

CCC LEGACY CHAPTER 123 NEWSLETTER

3412 Pleasant Run Road, Irving, Texas 75062

November 2013

**Chartered:** Nov. 1, 1985. **Past Presidents:** \*Nelson Oats, \*Harold Ballard, \*W. O. Mullin, \*Verle Oringderff, \*Harold Trammell, \*William Oakley, Frank Polenta, \*S. L. Baker, \*George Payne, \*Harry Steinert, & \*Al Clement. \*deceased. **Current Officers:** President-Mike Pixler, phone contact: 817-929-1557, First Vice President-Jim Rau, phone contact: 817-367-3343, Second Vice president-Pat Mann, phone: [info later], Secretary/Treasurer- Steve Porter, phone contact: 817-244-6714, Sergeant at Arms-Troy Jones, Chaplain-Rev. James Pixler, Kitchen Committee, [Open], Historian-Ruby Pixler, Reporter at Large & Newsletter Editor-Bill Stallings, phone contact: 972-255-7237.

**Monthly Meeting** is held on the *second* Saturday of each month from 10:30 AM to 1PM at the North Side Multipurpose Center, 1801 Harrington [North], Fort Worth, TX 76106. Dues are \$10 a person annually and are effective from Oct. to Oct.

**Directions:** Interstate Hwy 30 runs east & west. It accesses the downtown Fort Worth area from the south. Exit north on Henderson St. After a couple of miles it crosses a fork of the Trinity River and becomes State Hwy 199 which goes to Lake Worth, and the Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge. When you reach the traffic light at the intersection of 18<sup>th</sup> St. NW, turn right [east] and go up the hill four blocks to Homan St. Turn left [north], and go a block to the Y. Stay right and continue into the Center's rear parking lot. Our meeting room door with the CCC sign is to the right as you approach the building. Bring a friend & enjoy fun, fellowship & food. Sign the register for you may win the \$10 door prize.

**WEDDING ANNIVERSARIES:** None in November.

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY:** Jerriene Crooks, Crowley, TX, 11/05; Norbert Gebhard, Grandview, TX, 11/20; T. W. "Bill" McKee, Abilene, TX, 11/13; Claire Radi, San Antonio, TX, 11/25; & Ernest Scarbrough, Broken Arrow, OK, 11/17.

MINUTES OF MEETING OF CCC LEGACY CHAPTER 123, ON SATURDAY, November 9, 2013. Weather: Cloudy, Temp. 65, Attendance: 10.

The meeting was called to order at 11:00 AM by President Pixler. He then read a bit of humor from the "Seniorific News." The invocation was offered by Merle Timblin. Sgt.-at-Arms Troy Jones led the pledges to the flags.

President Pixler reminded the members of the purpose of the CCC Legacy. The membership was asked if they had received and read the October 2013 minutes in the newsletter and all indicated they had. A motion to accept the minutes as written was made by Jim Rau and 2<sup>nd</sup> by Merle Timblin. Motion passed.

No birthdays or anniversaries were reported of those present.

No old business was presented.

New business included a pictorial presentation of the CCC Legacy Reunion October 24-27, in Tucson, Arizona. Merle Timblin, Bill Stallings and President Pixler attended the Reunion. Announcement was made at the reunion that Chapter 123, CCC Legacy is now the only active chapter in the USA. Members were asked for ideas on how to continue to generate interest in the CCC Legacy. Possibilities included more publicity through local media and on the internet. Next year, 2014, is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lake Worth and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge so our chapter should use these opportunities to further publicize our goals and purposes.

Pass the Can drawing door prize was won by Larkin Dilbeck who donated it back to the chapter.

Merle Timblin offered the blessing and a motion to adjourn was made by Jim Rau and 2<sup>nd</sup> by Ruby Pixler. Motion passed and we adjourned at 12:12 PM.

A delicious meal was served by the ladies and enjoyed by all.

Respectfully submitted,

Steve Porter, Secretary/Treasurer

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## **OUR MEMBERS**

We talked with Helene Hubbard recently and we asked about Ernest. She told us that he is holding his own in his rehab hospital. She says he eats well and is able to sleep. If someone helps him out of bed into his wheelchair, he is able to get around some using his arms. He has little use of his legs. Helene spends about four hours with him just about every day. He has some dementia, but it comes and goes. Helene herself is doing well she tells us.

Pres. Pixler talked with Walter Atwood recently after he returned from the Tucson Reunion. He told Mike that his brother has developed stomach cancer and is not doing well.

We again congratulate our new Secretary/Treasurer Steve Porter, but have to report that one of Steve & Marianne's three sons has developed serious liver problems. Please keep the family in your thoughts and prayers.

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## **CHAPTER ETERNAL**

We have just recently learned that member and recent visitor to our meeting, Hermon L. Elliott, passed away while in the Veterans Hospital at Temple, Texas, while trying to recover from a bad fall. Just before the fall, we had a lively discussion with Hermon about his life both in and out of his time in the CCC. Her served in both New Mexico and Colorado, and up until just a few years ago, called New Mexico home before moving to Brenham, Texas. Our thoughts and prayers go to his daughter, Herma Loy Smith of Brenham, and granddaughter, Lisa Smith of Dallas, both members of Chapter 123. At this time services are pending, but will probably be at Portales, New Mexico.

## A CCC "BOY" REMINDS US OF A LITTLE REMEMBERED TRAGEDY THAT STRUCK THE CORPS

While in Tucson this past month for the CCC Legacy Reunion we got acquainted with Mr. Charles Varro of Westlake, Ohio, who is a semi-retired accountant, and proud CCC Boy. We had met Charles the previous year at the reunion in Montana, but had not gotten to sit down and talk with him. He recently sent along much material relating the vast accomplishments of the CCC in the 1930s and '40s. Buried within that short history of the CCC was a small paragraph about an event that happened in Florida in 1935. While we were in Tucson Charles had related to us some of the story of this event that we were very ignorant of. Later he sent a much more extensive account in greater detail of what happened then. We then did a little more research on-line of the event.

The time was September 2, 1935, Labor Day, and the place was the Florida Keys, south of the tip of the Florida peninsula. These tiny islands are like green stepping stones in the shallow waters that end at the Island of Key West; in particular the islands of interest; Windley Key and Lower Matecumbe Key with the Atlantic to the east and the Gulf of Mexico to the west. On these there were stationed three CCC built camps entirely populated with 684 veterans, mostly of World War I. In 1928 a highway from Homestead, Florida, to Key West was built, but a forty mile stretch in the middle was left off, and was served only by ferry boats with haphazard service. The veterans had been sent here 10 months before to build bridges to complete the gap in the highway.

A storm had formed quite quickly from a weak tropical disturbance in the Bahamas on August 29, and moved slowly westward becoming a full hurricane on September 1<sup>st</sup> when hurricane warnings were posted. It never became a "large" hurricane, but was compact and very intense; in fact the most intense in recorded history with winds of 150 to 200 miles per hour. The main transportation link between the Keys and Mainland Florida at the time was the Florida Overseas Railroad, a portion of the Florida East Coast Railway. The railroad had been built in 1912, but was never very successful, having declared bankruptcy in 1932. That was it, except for some ferry boat services as mentioned above.

The reason the World War I veterans were picked for this job goes back to the beginnings of the Great Depression and the Bonus Marches on Washington. In the early '20s the U.S. Congress passed a bill to honor veterans of WW I by giving them a bonus that would be payable in 1945. Veteran groups began lobbying to have this bonus paid early because they were out of work like everyone else that was hit by the Depression. President Hoover and Congress balked at this saying there was not enough money to pay them all at once. A large group of veterans camped out on the Capitol grounds to demand what they felt they were owed. The Army was called out to force the veterans out of Washington, and this caused a backlash and was one of the reasons that Hoover lost the 1932 Election. The veterans came back when Roosevelt took office, and to appease them he promised jobs within the CCC if they abandoned their march. The group of veterans sent to Florida were loosely organized and put in the charge of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration [FERA] to build the bridges and roadway. The men chosen to head them were hurriedly picked and apparently not the best suited for the job. The vets were working out of three camps; two on Lower Matecumbe Key and one on Windley Key. Their quarters were nothing but hurriedly built shacks with the only things between them and the bay was the local road and the railroad tracks; the average maximum height of the keys was six feet above sea level. A number of the vets brought their families with them because they had lost their homes. On this Labor Day weekend about one third of the 684 vets were on holiday leave either in the city of Key West or up in Miami. The rest were lounging in their mess hall or in their bunk houses, playing rummy or poker, some out fishing, others getting drunk. They were glad to have work and getting paid, but many felt they had been sent down there just to be out of Washington's hair.

The U.S. Weather Bureau issued hurricane warnings about the storm and the local inhabitants of the Keys began to take immediate action, but the veteran group and their leaders were either slow to react or never got the warning to begin with. One of the supervisors, who had experienced hurricanes, left for Key West on his honeymoon two days before. He left his second in charge with instructions to order a train to evacuate the veterans if the storm appeared threatening. This man was inexperienced and had set in motion to have a train brought down from Homestead, Florida, but failed to follow up and make sure the train was actually ordered. When someone did call to check, it was found that there was no train in Homestead; it would have to be put together and brought down from Miami. Valuable hours were lost before the train actually got to Homestead and started south. By that time hurricane force winds were already raking Lower Matecumbe and Windley Keys. The train was backing down to the keys so it would be facing forward on its' night run back. It stopped a few times to pick up local residents who wanted to get away from the storm.

When the storm hit the keys, it did it with a vengeance. The winds quickly became deafening, screaming with an unearthly roar. As their shacks were torn apart around them, some of the vets and locals tried to struggle to the small embankment of the railroad tracks, the only high ground, for some protection. When the tidal wave hit - a 15 foot wall of water - many of them were swept up and taken out to sea. The wind-whipped sand stripped the clothes off bodies, and in some cases actually stripped the skin off. One man had a two-by-four piece of lumber driven right through his chest. He survived until rescuers found him the next day, and when a doctor pulled the piece out, he died. No one knows the actual peak wind speeds of the storm, but by estimating the extent of the damage, they ranged up to 250 mph, similar to a Category V tornado. Clocks on the island stopped at 8:15-8:20 PM.

The rescue train got as far south as just north of Lower Matecumbe Key when the wind blew all ten of the heavy steel coaches right off the rails onto their sides. The very heavy steam engine alone stayed upright on the rails, but the storm surge extinguished the fire in the firebox. The people on the train survived though.

At first light of Tuesday, September 3, the devastation slowly became painfully evident. Survivors gradually came out to witness what was left. The islands had been swept clean of all buildings and all structures. One could look across from one island to the next without obstruction. Seventy of the men had been saved by hanging onto the fresh water tank car that had been spotted on a rail siding. The first organized relief came in the form of fifty American Legionnaires of Dade County who arrived just after dawn. They stood on the banks of the raging Snake Creek that divided them from getting to the camp on Lower Matecumbe trying to get across. When the supervisor who had been left in charge arrived there, and saw that the camp had been swept clean, he called across to see if anyone was there. When no one answered, he assumed that everyone had gotten away, and reported such to his superiors. It soon became apparent that no one answered because they were nearly all dead.

The best accounting of the death toll was about 400 fatalities; 256 of which were WWI veterans. The head of the Florida CCC sent several hundred young men and boys, including Company 1421, to help with the cleanup and removal of the dead bodies. The bridges the veterans were working on were never completed, and the railroad was never rebuilt.

Ernest Hemingway, who rode out the Hurricane at his home in Key West, arrived by boat on September 4<sup>th</sup>, and visited the site of the veterans' camp, and wrote about it in a magazine article. He didn't pull any punches in his opinions on how he felt the veterans had been treated:

*"... wealthy people, yachtsmen, fishermen such as President Hoover and Presidents Roosevelt, do not come to the Florida Keys in hurricane months...There is a known danger to property. But veterans, especially the bonus-*

*marching variety of veterans, are not property. They are only human beings; unsuccessful human beings, and all they have to lose is their lives. They are doing coolie labor for a top wage of \$45 a month and they have been put down on the Florida Keys where they can't make trouble. It is hurricane months, sure, but if anything comes up, you can always evacuate them, can't you?"*

The only memorial to the event is the "1935 Hurricane Memorial" built in 1937 in the village of Islamorada which is just north of where the camps were. It was built to honor the hundreds of veterans and civilians who lost their lives in the "Great Hurricane on Labor Day of 1935." In front of the shaft is a crypt containing the cremated remains of approximately 300 of those lost.

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In a footnote to this, an inventor by the name of Donald Roebing was impressed by the difficulty of rescuing victims of this storm, and was inspired to design an amphibious tractor that could travel through flooded areas. These evolved into the series of amphibious vehicles called the Landing Vehicle Tracked [LVT] widely used in World War II.

*Thanks to Mr. Charles Varro for sending along the article in the June, 1994, issue of "CCC Journal" written by Fred C. Painton entitled "Rendezvous With Death..."*

*We also used online material from Wikipedia on: "The 1935 Labor Day Hurricane," and an article by Dr. Nan Benowitz, "Labor Day Hurricane of 1935," plus information from the U.S. Weather Bureau on the hurricane.*

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## **AN IMPORTANT REMINDER ABOUT OUR DECEMBER MEETING**

Our Saturday, December 14, 2013, meeting will be our annual Christmas meeting. We will have our usual Christmas gift drawing, so bring a gift of no more than \$10 or so. The women are to bring a gift for a woman, and the men a gift for a man. Mark your calendars!

The Civilian Conservation Corps Legacy is a non-profit organization dedicated to research, preservation, and education to promote better understanding of the CCC and its continuing contribution to American life and culture. *"I propose to create a Civilian Conservation Corps to be used in simple work, more important, however, than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work.*

**--FDR, 1933**

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