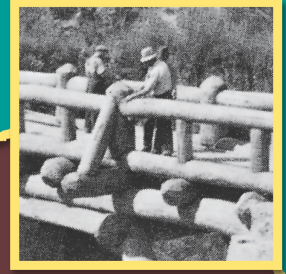


Relief for Youth: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration in North Dakota

By Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr.



The agricultural economy of North Dakota was in near collapse when Franklin D. Roosevelt took the oath of office as President of the United States in March, 1933. Most of the western section of the state lay in the grip of prolonged drought, and the people of the Red River Valley were only slightly better off. In most areas fully one-third of the people needed assistance and in some sections the figure was nearly 90 percent.¹ Roosevelt acted swiftly to provide relief for the entire nation; one of the first agencies created for this purpose was the **Civilian Conservation Corps** (CCC) with Robert Fechner of Tennessee as director. During the nine years which followed the Corps became one of the most successful and popular work relief programs of the New Deal, providing temporary employment for over 2,750,000 young men and financial assistance for their families.²

The original purpose of the emergency conservation work program, as envisioned in the spring of 1933, was to take young men from cities and towns of the nation and place them in **work camps** all over the country where they would engage in **forest conservation and preservation activities**. Most participants were to be young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, but some provision was made for veterans regardless of age, and each camp was also to include among its enrolled personnel a small number of “local experienced men” or “LEMS” who would help the younger men adjust to their new environment. All enrollees were to be paid thirty dollars per month, of which twenty-five dollars would go to their dependents. Soon the program expanded beyond the original concept to include men from all areas, urban and rural, and to engage in a wide variety of work from forest preservation to wildlife refuge development, park development, and soil conservation.³

In organization the CCC was a bureaucratic monstrosity; at first glance one wonders that its administrative machinery functioned at all, but in fact it worked quite well. Briefly, it operated as follows. The army established and administered the camps, each of which was designed to accommodate approximately two hundred men. The men were

selected for participation by the Labor Department, although the real authority for selection was delegated to local relief agencies. In each camp the work project was administered by the appropriate state or federal agency depending upon the nature of the work to be done. Typically, the projects were assigned to the Park Service, the Soil Conservation Service, the Bureau of Wildlife Management, the Forest Service, or some other sub-division of the Department of Agriculture, or the Department of Interior, or their state counterpart. The Office of Education also played a role, since from the beginning an instructional program was offered in most camps.⁴

The creation of the CCC was well received in North Dakota. The reaction of the press, generally favorable, was typified by an editorial in the April 16, 1933, edition of the *Grand Forks Herald* which warned that any work involving considerable spending in time of financial crisis should be undertaken with caution, but went on to say that Roosevelt’s proposal was laudable and that if intelligently administered could produce benefits of lasting value at a reasonable cost.⁵

North Dakota’s public officials were pleased with the CCC, as were the leaders of many important

private organizations including the American Legion, chambers of commerce, the League of North Dakota Municipalities, and the Farmers Union. The only major complaint, one which was never to be satisfied, was that too few camps were contemplated. Many advocates were also concerned by the fact that in the beginning the Army planned to close all the camps in the winter as a result of the harsh weather. This problem was soon resolved, however, and after the first year the camps remained open year around.⁶

The first and only selection director in North Dakota was **John E. Williams**, executive secretary of the State Emergency Relief Administration and later assistant director of the State Welfare Board. Williams was a capable administrator and sensitive to the financial needs of his state. He constantly badgered Washington for more camps and greater allocations, but his primary concern was the identification and selection of qualified young men for the CCC. Like most state selection directors, he found it necessary to delegate much of the day-to-day responsibility in this process to county welfare boards which varied considerably in the quality of their personnel and their devotion to the program and thus often

produced uneven results in their efforts to choose young men who both deserved and desired to go to camp. Nevertheless, under Williams' direction the selection process worked effectively in North Dakota and was regarded by CCC officials in Washington as one of the most efficient in the nation.⁷

Of the North Dakotans who served in the CCC we know little because not much biographical data are available and the reports of the county relief boards apparently have not survived. What we do know is that almost all enrollees were white, came from families averaging about five in number, and averaged about twenty years of age; most had achieved the equivalent of an eighth grade education. One might reasonably inquire why Indians were not more common in the camps. They were eligible, either for the regular CCC, or a special program designed for them, but their numbers amounted to only about 10 percent of the total enrolled in North Dakota, and almost all of these remained on their reservations. This probably resulted from the fact that the state administration viewed them as the least satisfactory enrollees, regarding them almost as harshly as African Americans were regarded in the South.⁸



Figures 1 & 2. Camp SP-1 near Dunseith. Though CCC camps varied, the Dunseith camp was considered typical. Workers at this camp labored primarily in the International Peace Garden during the 1930s. (*Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 40.1.7*) **INSET CCC logo.** (Courtesy www.qmmuseum.lee.army.mil)

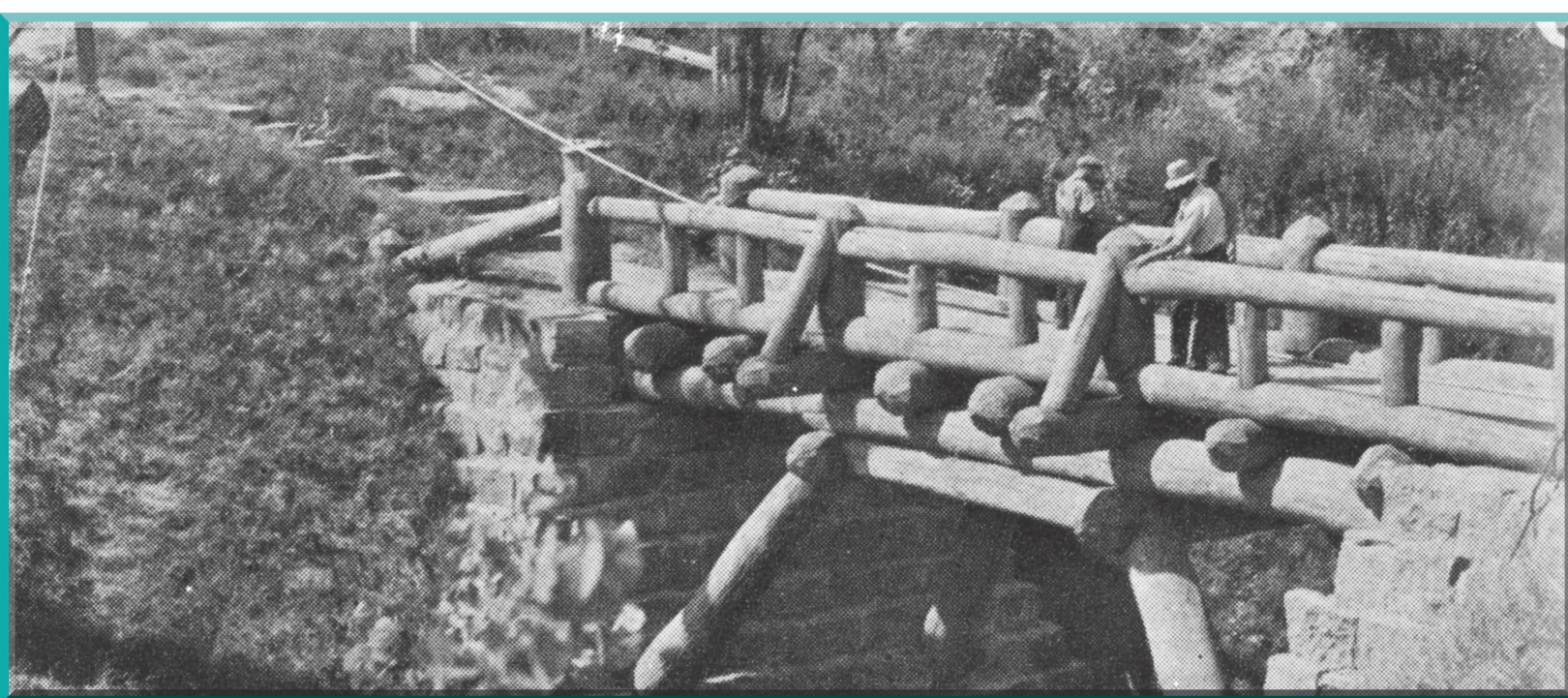


Figure 3. CCC projects in North Dakota aided many diverse organizations. Here, CCC workers are shown building the footbridge at Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park near Mandan. (*Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 1937 CCC Manual, page 68*)

At the peak of CCC operations in North Dakota there were sixteen camps located near the towns of Grand Forks, Fargo, Bismarck, Mandan, Dunseith, Foxholm, Kenmare, Kramer, Larimore, Kelvin [Rolette County], Edmunds, Upham, Mohall, and Medora. Most were engaged in soil conservation work under cooperative arrangements whereby farmers supplied tools and equipment in exchange for information and demonstrations of new conservation techniques; several of the camps were also engaged in park or wildlife refuge development. Among their most enduring projects were the improvements in the International Peace Garden, Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park, Theodore Roosevelt Regional Park [now Theodore Roosevelt National Park], and municipal parks in Fargo and Grand Forks.⁹

The quality of life in a CCC camp varied so much from time to time and place to place that it is almost impossible to say that any conditions were typical. Nevertheless, from existing data some tentative generalizations may be formulated. In the early days many camps were mere tent cities with few comforts and no embellishments, but often the enrollees themselves undertook to provide improvements. The results varied, but were occasionally spectacular as in the case of Camp SP-3 near Mandan. Beginning with a very shoddy campsite in April 1937, the men remodeled old

buildings, added new ones, and landscaped, all in their spare time. The project was chronicled in *The Veteran's Bugle*, the camp newspaper, and was obviously a matter of great pride to most of the enrollees. This camp was an exception, however. Most descriptions and pictures of CCC camps in North Dakota reveal that they were very plain and unattractive even after they were well established.¹⁰

The attitude of the **Camp Commander** was crucial to the maintenance of high standards and living conditions in the camps. If the commander exhibited a lax attitude it was likely to be reflected in the attitudes and actions of the men. A typical example was that of Camp SP-1 near Dunseith, which in 1939 was commanded by Lt. Robert G. Metcalf, a man who drank excessively, was frequently absent from his post, and exerted almost no positive influence over his men. An official inspection of the camp in October, 1939, revealed terrible conditions, and Metcalf was forthwith removed from his command. His replacement, Lt. Charles V. Christianson, brought rapid improvements and in May 1941, the camp held an open house and proudly displayed its facilities to the people of Dunseith, as well as the representatives of the army and the government. Happily, the case of Metcalf was an exception. Most camp commanders were competent and devoted to their duties. The official records of the CCC in North Dakota contain

very few references to cases such as this and most camp newspapers reveal that the men were satisfied and content with their leaders.¹¹

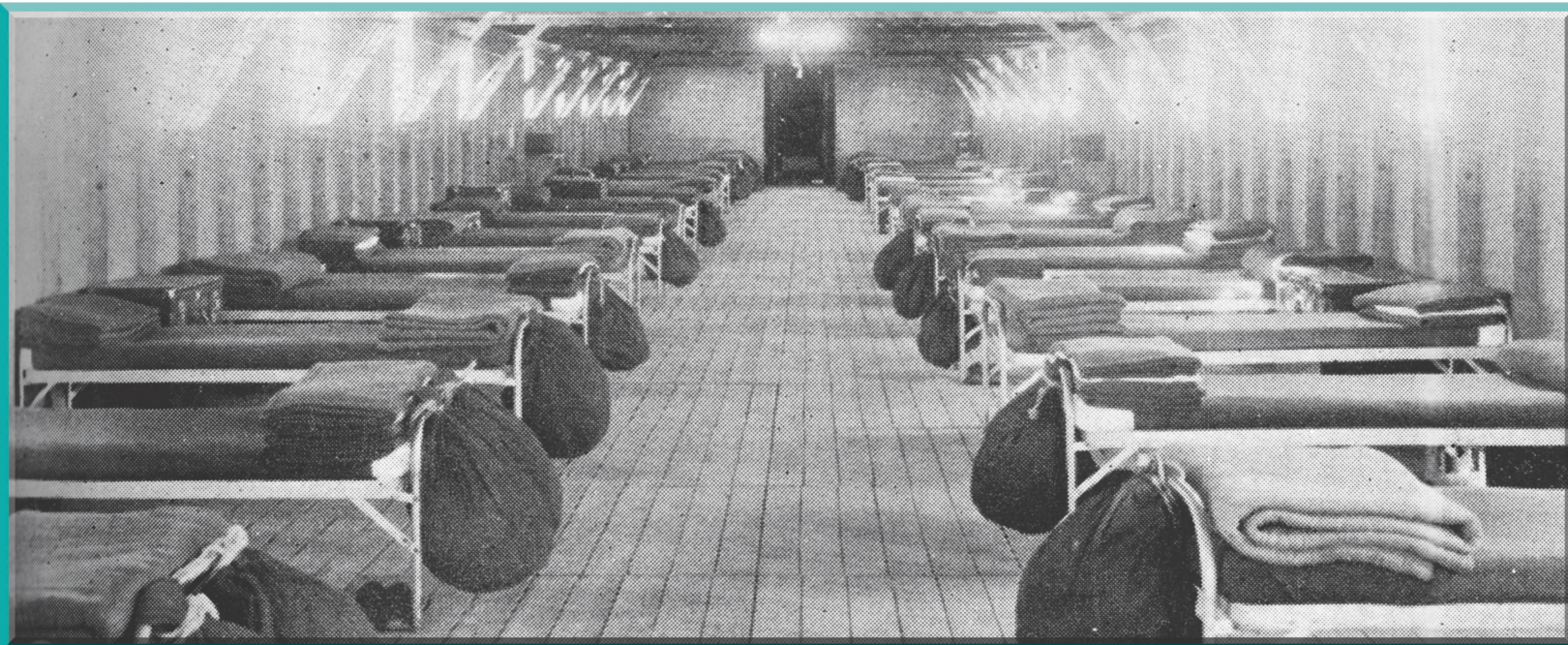
Bureaucratic red tape also sometimes affected camp conditions. An inspection in October, 1935, revealed that Camp SP-4 near Fargo had been infested with bedbugs and that the enrollees had been required to pay extermination costs. An inquiry through army channels revealed that a request for assistance had been denied because budgetary regulations did not provide for covering the costs of extermination. Officially, camps were not supposed to have bedbugs. But again, such cases were exceptions to the rule. The Selection and Inspection Divisions were generally happy with the army's administration.¹²

There is insufficient evidence upon which to base a precise analysis of the health and condition of the average CCC enrollee in North Dakota; however, some things are clear. Many of these young men were underweight and had bad teeth. Many were also ignorant of the basic rules of personal hygiene and diet. The CCC experience provided them an opportunity to correct these problems, and it is evident that many took advantage of it. The records are full of the personal testaments of enrollees who were delighted with the physical improvements they experienced as a result of life in the camps. Comments also appear frequently in camp

newspapers, and one paper conducted an informal survey of the company which revealed an average weight gain of 11.5 pounds in the group between April 1 and September 25, 1937. Official records indicate an average weight gain of ten pounds for all enrollees during their periods of enlistment over a span of nine years and thus would suggest that the informal survey was fairly accurate.¹³

The work regimen of a CCC camp was demanding and sometimes dangerous. Typically, the day began at 6:00 a.m., with reveille followed by breakfast and inspection. Work began at 8:00 a.m., and continued until 4:00 p.m., with one hour off for lunch at midday. Usually well supplied with tools and equipment and competently led by their project director and foremen, the enrollees sallied (to set out energetically) forth each day to build, plant, dig, spread, improve, and replace. There can be no doubt that most enrollees worked hard, despite some evidence to the contrary. Whether or not they worked efficiently is a matter of debate that will probably never be resolved. Some critics alleged that unskilled, untrained boys could not possibly be effective, especially in their efforts to improve forests and wildlife refuges and to promote soil conservation techniques. While this may be true in part, the fact remains that these things are precisely what they did do; many of their material achievements still exist, a testimony to their dedication, if not to their skill.¹⁴

Figure 4. Camp SP-4 camp at Fargo. CCC workers were housed in barracks similar to this one. (*Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 1937 CCC Manual, page 73*)



Undoubtedly exhausted at the end of the working day, the men nevertheless participated in numerous leisure-time activities. Most popular, of course, were sports. Many camps participated competitively in baseball, softball, basketball, track, and occasionally football. There were intercamp leagues, and often camp teams participated in municipal leagues. **Intramural sports** also occupied many enrollees during their leisure time. They played volleyball, horseshoes, tennis, and pool most frequently.

If the reports appearing in the camp newspapers are to be believed, the men often took their sports quite seriously. For example, *The Peavie Press* in Camp SF-1 followed the fortunes of the 1937 championship baseball team in great detail with persistent though unsuccessful efforts to emulate the writing style of Grantland Rice. “We have rolled over the opposition in fine style,” reported the sportswriter, “but all the team will be gone next year. It remains to be seen whether players of equal talent can be recruited for next year’s club.”¹⁵

Likewise, failure in sports was not taken lightly. “The diamondball team has disintegrated,” wrote the editor of *The Golden Chevron* on July 23, 1936. “Our poor play reflects an apparent lack of interest and is a disgraceful reflection upon the entire camp.”¹⁶

Camp newspapers absorbed the time and interest of many enrollees. These papers are remarkable documents which reveal much about camp life and the enrollees’ attitudes, and they deserve a thorough discussion. The camp newspapers served as a means of communication and expression for both the enrollees and the camp administrators. Almost every camp had one, and although they varied in quality and frequency of publication, they were similar in many respects. Almost always the paper was published by the camp journalism class under the direction of the Education Advisor. The editorship was always held by an enrollee, but it was a difficult, time consuming, and often controversial job that changed hands frequently. In content, the papers invariably contained an editorial page, a section devoted to the use of the company com-

mander and the project superintendent, a religious section, a sports section, a section devoted to barracks news, a section devoted to camp humor, and an educational page.¹⁷

One of the best camp newspapers in North Dakota was *The Veterans’ Bugle*, published by Co. 2775, Camp SP-3, near Mandan. Extant copies run from 1937 to 1939 and are located in the Archives of the State Historical Society at Bismarck. They reflect the views of a group of men deeply concerned about their present condition and their future. The paper devoted a great deal of space to the need for self-improvement. It encouraged the men to work hard, to avail themselves of the academic and vocational educational programs in the camp, and not to be downhearted. In the March 1938 issue, the editor proclaimed:¹⁸

We are not here because we are inclined to follow the path of least resistance to earn our daily bread, but because it enables us to retain our self-respect in the face of adverse conditions. We do not want to “gold-brick” on WPA which seems to have become a national pass-time. Some people think the VCCC is a transient camp to keep drifters off the street and reduce inconvenience to the public caused by panhandling. Some careless enrollees create unfavorable impressions. But the pay is not conducive to permanence so most enrollees want a job. We have faith in the future and believe that better times are in store.

The papers invariably placed great stress on behavior, both in and out of camp. In a column entitled “The Boss’s Corner” in the *Peavie Press*, Lt. J.R. Harlow, Commander of Co. 796, Camp SP-1 near Foxholm, offered the following advice to his “rookies” in October, 1937:¹⁹

Obey your superiors—this includes
everyone until you find out who’s who
Be clean and neat
Be on time for mess
Make friends

Put in an honest day's work
Respect the rights of the people in town
Don't believe everything you hear
Don't be a borrower
Don't act tough
Don't mind a little kidding
Don't let your beard grow—if you have one
Above all—don't try to date the older
fellows' girls.

Rowdiness or drunkenness at camp parties always brought criticism, and improper behavior in town was viewed as intolerable. Fortunately, however, there was little of this. The records of CCC operations in North Dakota contain only a few references to incidents involving townspeople and enrollees, but there are many references to the existence of good relations between the camps and nearby towns in the official records and the camp newspapers.²⁰

The **educational program** was an important, if controversial, aspect of camp life in the CCC. Each camp had an educational advisor and an education committee whose job it was to develop and deliver a curriculum which the enrollees could take on a voluntary part-time basis. It was a difficult task because the educational backgrounds and intellectual skills of the enrollees were so diverse.

Most programs were similar in pattern, but they varied considerably in quality. They usually consisted of academic courses at all levels, vocational courses such as auto mechanics, carpentry, shopwork, and the like, and occasionally courses in social behavior.²¹ Although it was possible for the enrollees to earn credit toward grammar school, high school, or college graduation, and many did so, it is quite clear that the vocational courses were more popular. Indeed, many young men joined the CCC specifically to obtain vocational training in hopes they could find a job as a direct result.²²

The enrollees regarded the vocational courses and the on-the-job training they received during working hours as equal parts of their education, and this was one of the most controversial aspects of the educational program. The problem was that the technical service personnel felt they did not receive enough credit for the training they provided, and they constantly demanded greater recognition. However, it was not until 1937 that their demands were satisfied. After that date more emphasis was placed upon vocational training as a part of changing CCC policy and many enrollees clearly recognized and appreciated the move.²³

Controversy also swirled about the educational program for its alleged low quality, and no doubt



Figure 5. CCC workers at Kenmare pose for camp photo, circa 1937. (*Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU, Fargo, 1937 CCC Manual, page 48*)

it seldom reached the highest of professional educational standards. Yet the program was popular. In North Dakota participation appears to have varied from 75 to 95 percent. The camp newspapers devoted much attention to education, camp surveys indicated approval, and many individual enrollees left testimonials which reflect their pleasure.²⁴ Typical of these is the following statement of Trygve Wiseth who wrote:²⁵

I enjoyed all the time I spent in the CCC because I know I bettered my education, am making friends, securing a better understanding of life and its problems. I have found myself and know what I want to do with my life.

There is, unfortunately, no accurate way to determine how many men obtained private employment as a direct result of the training they received in camp. It is beyond doubt, however, that the men viewed CCC education, training, and experience as a route to self-sufficiency, and camp newspapers carefully followed the progress of ex-enrollees in the outside world. For example, *The Peavie Press* in its July and August 1937 issues recorded that Robert Horner went to work for Standard Oil in Minot as a mechanic and truck driver and Alberdel Howie was with a private contractor near Dickinson as a heavy machinery operator. Both received their training in camp. The paper also frequently carried editorials and “helpful hints” on “job-getting” and “how to impress” a prospective employer.²⁶

Although many of the foregoing statements about the nature of the CCC are necessarily tentative, and although the debate over cost and efficiency rages on among those who despise the very idea of government work agencies, one point is indisputable. The contributions to the people of North Dakota made by the corps were substantial. The CCC gave employment for varying periods of time to 31,764 men, most of whom remained within the state. Since the typical relief family averaged five in number it may be assumed that the allotments distributed by these men benefitted an addi-

tional 120,000 residents of the state. The total cost of CCC operations in North Dakota during the nine-year, three-month lifetime of the program was \$16,241,189, including \$7,525,923 in allotments.²⁷ The individual cost was approximately \$1,100 per man per year.

The material achievements of the CCC may be divided into eight categories: **structural and transportation improvements, erosion and flood control, forest culture and protection, landscape recreation development, and pest control.** The corpsmen built or improved hundreds of barns, bridges, garages, cabins, latrines, lookout towers, shelters, and other buildings in state parks. They built 431,555 rods of fence and 623,012 cubic yards of levees, dikes, and jetties, in addition to 124 impoundment dams and 336 small reservoirs. They built 996 miles of truck rails and minor roads. They checked gullies, terraced slopes, and laid 248,386 square yards of rip rap. They planted 1,773 acres of trees and improved 8,625 acres of mature forest. They spent 2,762 man-days fighting forest fires and 4,457 man-days in fire prevention activities. They planted 1,041,622 trees and shrubs in parks and improved more than 5,000 acres of park land. They revegetated 6,816 acres of range, spent 28,800 man-days in lake and pond development, and destroyed enormous numbers of insects and rodents. Many of their structures, such as the lodge and museum at **Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park**, remain today for the public to use and enjoy.²⁸

The second major relief program for young people was the **National Youth Administration** (NYA), established on June 26, 1935, with Aubrey Williams of Texas as National Director. In North Dakota E.W Willson became the first state director, but he was replaced in January 1936 by Secretary of State Robert Byrne, who served until the state administration was dismantled in 1942.²⁹ The need for such an organization was acute. In the summer of 1935 there were still more than four million people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four unemployed nationwide, and in North Dakota the drought continued to cause havoc with agricul-

ture. Nearly one-third of the entire population of the state was still on relief.³⁰

When originally established the purposes of the NYA were to provide part-time employment for high school and college students, to provide relief employment for youth who were not in school, to offer vocational guidance and counseling, and to promote useful and job-qualifying leisure time activities. The spectrum of NYA activities was somewhat broader than that of the CCC, although inevitably there was some overlapping. The NYA also differed from the CCC, at least at the beginning, in that most of the participants remained at home. This changed later with the inauguration of the resident center program.

From its inception in 1935 until 1939, the administrative functions of the NYA were carried out through the WPA. Then, in 1939, the NYA became an autonomous organization under the general aegis (protection) of the Federal Security Administration, and it functioned independently until 1942. During its last year of existence the state administrations were dismantled, and the NYA operated

through a regional administrative framework as a part of the War Manpower Commission. The period between 1939 and 1942 witnessed the greatest level of achievement and popularity for the NYA. It was independent, and its activities were characterized by a great deal of local participation and decision-making. After 1942, however, as its operations were modified and centralized under the WMC, it lost much of its local support and popularity.³¹

Like the CCC two years before, the NYA was generally well received in North Dakota. Most politicians and welfare officials welcomed it and the press was generally enthusiastic. A typical favorable newspaper comment is that which appeared in the *Bismarck Tribune* on June 27, 1935:³²

What to do with America's bewildered youth had become more of a problem with the development of the Depression. . . The announcement of [President Roosevelt's] new program to rehabilitate jobless youngsters and keep our school-graduating boys and girls from the junkheap of life will strike a responsive chord in the



Figure 6. A CCC truck driver and co-worker take a break from work. (SHSND 0417-14)

minds of those who have been alarmed by this gigantic problem. . . The money will not be wasted. . . The Depression will not last forever. There will be a need for trained youth in the [near] future.

The administrative staff in North Dakota was small at the outset, consisting of only four persons in the state office and five area directors, and could not possibly have carried out its responsibilities adequately had it not been for a great deal of citizen participation. There was, for instance, the State Advisory Committee which was appointed by the National Director upon the recommendation of the state administrator. This group consisted of seven people representing various constituencies, such as business, agriculture, education, labor, and youth. Their responsibility was to advise the state administrator concerning general policy.³³ Much more important, however, were the Local Advisory Committees which usually included from three to seven members such as county agents, school superintendents, secretaries of welfare boards, prominent citizens, and youth. Eventually such committees were established in every county and they gave invaluable assistance in publicizing the NYA principles and purposes and in promoting work projects. It was generally agreed that without these committees the NYA could not have functioned adequately.³⁴

Under the guidance of **E. A. Willson** and his Educational Program Supervisor J. Arthur Solien, the NYA began operations in the late summer of 1935, concentrating all its energies on the **school-work program**. They found at first that many high school and college administrators were reluctant to participate and had to be “educated” concerning the merits of the program. When school began in September only twenty-one high schools had come in, but by the end of 1935 participation was almost universal; ultimately, only two high schools in the entire state, Hoople and Mapleton, failed to join. The program became extremely popular, but as a result of chronically limited funding only 7 percent of the state’s needy high school students and 12 percent of those in college could receive assis-

tance. These limitations placed a terrible burden upon the school men, who were required to select participants from the large pool of applicants, and excited the harshest criticism of the program even during the period of its greatest popularity.³⁵

The recipients of NYA assistance were paid an average of six dollars per month in high school and fifteen dollars in college; by today’s standards such sums appear absurdly small. It must be remembered, however, that most of these students came from families averaging five in number with annual incomes under five hundred dollars. For people such as these small sums were crucial, and it is clear that many students completed school with NYA assistance who would otherwise have been denied their education.³⁶

Aubrey Williams and his associates in Washington envisioned that NYA employment should provide more than relief. It also aimed to provide **moral uplift, training, and benefit to the community**. These lofty goals were difficult to achieve in practice, however, and were the source of numerous difficulties. For one thing, the students often possessed little talent, but worse, the school men, while generally cooperative, did not exert much imagination or effort in the creation and administration of noble projects. They tended to assign their students to mundane or “make-work” activities and to provide little or no moral and vocational guidance. They complained that they had too little time and were provided too little money to do more, and so the school work program never measured up to the ideal. Nevertheless, some useful, if uninspiring, work was accomplished and students often felt that they benefitted from the training they received as well as from the financial rewards. The school-work program emphasized **construction and repair of buildings and facilities, apparatus maintenance, clerical and departmental assistance, health work, recreational leadership, and arts and crafts**, in order of importance. Quality and supervision improved somewhat due to specific efforts in 1941, but soon the war brought even more drastic changes.³⁷

Administrative problems became more numerous and complex in early 1936 with the creation of the out-of-school work program. Here again, the theory was to combine work with training and service to the community and thus go beyond the concept of basic work relief. The NYA administrators in Washington desired to stress the dignity of labor. They believed that many youth were ill-suited for white-collar jobs and were in need of training which would enable them to make a living with their hands. But carrying such a theory into practice proved difficult for several reasons. A major problem was generated by the widely dispersed population of the state. While many people were in distress, it was often impossible to find them in sufficient numbers in one location to set up any project, let alone an imaginative one. Furthermore, those youth who were available were often elementary school dropouts with limited potential. Qualified supervisors were difficult to locate and public agencies were reluctant to serve as project co-sponsors because they lacked resources or regarded the NYA, to quote Robert Byrne, as a “play-work set-up.” It was frequently necessary to “educate” them before they would consider rendering assistance.³⁸

As in the case of the school-work program, the out-of-school program partially solved its difficulties in time. In this process the Local Advisory Committees played a substantial role through their activities, but

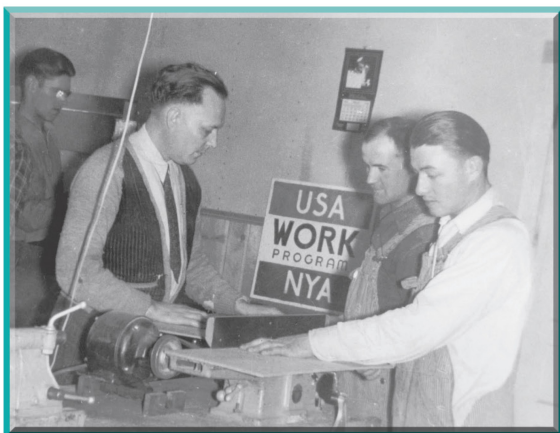


Figure 7. Young men who took advantage of the NYA often learned skills such as woodworking at the Mandan Resident Center. (Courtesy of Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota)

the improvement in quality of both the applicants and the supervision was also a factor. Most important, though, was the policy change in 1938 which resulted in the creation of the resident centers.³⁹

The prototype of the resident center program in North Dakota was the **girls' camp** which was operated at Belcourt from August 12 to September 30, 1935. Fifty-nine young women from the poverty-stricken Turtle Mountain area attended the camp where they received food, shelter, and educational opportunities, in addition to personal hygiene and dietary instruction. Most of the administrators and participants regarded the camp as a great success at the time it disbanded, and other camps for girls were contemplated but never established. A similar camp for boys was set up in 1937 and operated throughout the summer at **Beaver Lake State Park** in Logan County. It was sponsored by the businessmen in the community of Burnstad and offered a program similar to that of a CCC camp. Like the girls' camp it was successful, but was not repeated.⁴⁰

As in other states the resident center program in North Dakota was operated in close cooperation with schools and colleges. The program began in 1938, and within two years twenty-two centers accommodating six hundred youth were in operation. Usually, the residents worked half of each day and attended classes the rest of the time. Their studies were either academic or vocational in nature, depending upon the needs of the residents and the capabilities of the sponsoring institutions. The residents were paid twenty to twenty-five dollars per month, but most of their income was used to reimburse the school for room, board, and tuition.⁴¹

The resident centers for men were located at Dickinson, Fargo, Ellendale, Wahpeton, Mayville, Grand Forks, Park River, Bottineau, Minot, and Williston. In all but one of these projects the boys were involved in major construction activities on buildings or the renovation of other major campus structures. At Fargo sixty of the eighty residents studied not at the Agricultural College, but at the **“Farm Folk**

School” which offered a series of “mini-courses” for young farmers. Here they received not only practical and theoretical instruction, but also assisted in agricultural experiments. This project resulted, among other things, in the creation of a new variety of tomato called “Bounty.”⁴²

The resident centers for young women were located at Arnegard, Dickinson, Fargo, Mandan, Mayville, Minot, Valley City, and Park River. They emphasized sewing projects, clerical projects, and library work with the ultimate intention of training the residents to become better homemakers and to qualify them for domestic employment. The results were generally positive. The appearance and attitude of the girls improved and, although the statistics are not entirely adequate or complete, it appears that approximately one-half of those who left the centers to seek private employment found it.⁴³

The youth who participated in the NYA program, like those in the CCC, usually came from families with an annual income of less than five hundred dollars and most were already receiving some form of public assistance. They ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-four, with an average of nineteen. In the beginning many in the out-of-school work program were grammar school or high school dropouts; by 1938, most were high school graduates. They were predominately rural; 52 percent came from farm homes and only 14 percent from cities over five thousand in population. Most turned their income over to their families, but many also used the money for clothing, education, and medical care. Almost all who left recorded opinions found the NYA to be a useful and rewarding experience.⁴⁴

Overall, the accomplishments of the NYA work program were substantial, if unspectacular. An average of three thousand high school and one thousand college students per month received aid between 1935 and 1942. In the out-of-school work program more than three thousand North Dakota youth received assistance each month, and they manufactured or repaired thousands of useful articles ranging in size and complexity from single garments to large buildings. The total cost of this



Figure 8. Cooking, canning, and other household tasks provided parts of a coursework at the NYA centers. These women were students at the NYA Resident Center at Mandan during the late 1930s. (Courtesy of Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota)

activity amounted to approximately \$4,992,191. As in the case of the CCC there were some who viewed the operations of the NYA as wasteful and highly inefficient, but they always failed to take into account the human element, the immeasurable value of salvaging a human life.⁴⁵

One of the most theoretically attractive but least successful aspects of the NYA was its counselling, guidance, and job placement program. As late as 1940 no formal guidance program had been created in North Dakota, and although all NYA youth were required to register with the United States Re-Employment Service very few were placed directly in private employment as a result. The reasons for this problem usually arose from a combination of inadequacy of training and unavailability of jobs. Often, too, there was no relationship between NYA training and available employment. When crops were good youth simply went to work on the farms, and when conditions were reversed they came back in search of assistance.⁴⁶ But when the war began, everything changed. The Great Struggle, in fact, played such a key role in the history of both the NYA and the CCC that the wartime era deserves a separate discussion.

When the CCC celebrated its eighth anniversary in April, 1941, the end was already near. The war in Europe was in its second year and many observ-

ers believed that America would soon become involved. Advocates were justifiably concerned that the Corps would come to be viewed as superfluous as the needs of the country turned toward national defense.⁴⁷

To meet this threat CCC officials at both the state and national levels sought to promote the usefulness of their organization under rapidly changing conditions. In Washington, Director James J. McEntee strove hard to demonstrate how important the CCC could be to the war effort through its educational programs which could be used to train enrollees in war related skills. Simultaneously, in North Dakota, Williams and his associates promoted the same idea and also attempted to recruit more effectively, stressing the role of the CCC as a program for character development, education, and job training rather than relief.

These efforts failed. The Corps could not overcome its image as a relief agency. Furthermore, the army and the rapidly improving economy reduced the ranks of the unemployed so dramatically that the population segment in need of relief virtually disappeared. Often, too, the recruiting program excited resentment. By the spring of 1942 there were no applicants and the enrollees in the one remaining camp were clamoring for an early discharge.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, in Congress, a debate ensued over the very existence of both the CCC and the NYA. One of the provisions of the Appropriations Bill of 1941–1942 authorized the creation of a joint committee to investigate all federal agencies and recommend the elimination of those not essential to the war effort. Six of the twelve members of the committee were conservative Southerners; among them were Senators Harry F. Byrd of Virginia and Kenneth McKellar of Tennessee, both vigorous opponents of the CCC. Under their influence the committee recommended that the CCC be abolished no later than July 1, 1942, and McKellar introduced a bill calling for the liquidation of both the CCC and the NYA.

The McKellar Bill was never reported out of committee although the hearings excited a good deal

of interest throughout the country. Instead, the end came by another means. On May 4, 1942, President Roosevelt asked for an appropriation of forty-nine million dollars to operate the CCC during the fiscal year 1942–1943, but the House Appropriations Committee defied him by voting not to comply on June 3. The fight then went to the floor of the House, where friends of the Corps fought a desperate but unsuccessful final struggle to preserve it. North Dakota **Congressman Usher L. Burdick** and Charles Robertson took no part in the debate, but voted for the appropriation. **Senator Gerald P. Nye** opposed it, and **Senator William L. Langer** did not vote.⁴⁹

At home the press said little. Engrossed with their coverage of military and naval action abroad most papers merely reported the demise of the CCC without comment, but an editorial in the *Fargo Forum* probably represented the views of many people when it pointed out that both the CCC and the NYA had been set up to meet desperate needs and had done so adequately. Now, however, times had changed. Manpower was in great demand and New Deal relief agencies were unnecessary. To continue them when they were no longer needed was wasteful bureaucracy.⁵⁰

Many significant changes occurred in the operation of the NYA between 1940 and 1943. For one thing the number of qualified applicants began to decline dramatically. During the twelve-month period commencing on January 1, 1941, the pool of registered unemployed persons in North Dakota decreased by 50 percent and applications kept pace.

In 1941 national NYA policy shifted so as to place more emphasis upon national defense. A new defense training program was inaugurated to be conducted jointly by the NYA, the state employment service and the vocational schools. It operated in Bismarck, Ellendale, Grand Forks, and Fargo and offered training in welding, machine shop, sheet metal, woodworking, forging, and radio repair. The trainees divided their time between work and instruction, much as they had in the resident centers, and the program worked quite well except for occasional

outbreaks of friction between NYA employees who supervised production and vocational educators who conducted classes. Clearly, the vocational educators were becoming more sensitive than ever about the existence of potential competition.⁵¹

With the inception of the national defense program the selection criteria for NYA participation changed dramatically. Need, even as defined in the broadest sense of the word, was de-emphasized and more stress was placed on aptitude. The NYA sought and recruited trainees who could benefit from the instruction and would, in turn, be likely to find employment thereafter. Standard aptitude tests were used to identify such people.⁵²

For the first time in its history the NYA job placement program began to function effectively. The records of qualified trainees were sent to defense industries, of course, but often the representatives of these firms would come to the training centers and hire people on the spot. Frequently, too, NYA youth obtained employment through their own efforts. In any case two things happened: many North Dakota youth received job training and placement, and as a result almost all of them left the state. This development caused a sudden increased criticism by those who felt that the NYA was costing North Dakota a significant element of her population and was therefore no longer worthwhile.⁵³

The nature of the NYA program was again altered in 1942 when the regular out-of-school program was entirely eliminated and the War Production Program was established. At the same time the state administration was replaced by a regional system which put North Dakota in Region VIII along with South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota, with the regional headquarters in St. Paul.

Each state was divided into **Master Project Areas** with units of operation at various locations. In North Dakota these were at Mandan, Ellendale, Fargo, Grand Forks, and Park River. Robert Byrne, former state NYA administrator, was named Master Project Manager. The unit shops engaged in welding, sheet metal work, woodworking, and radio repair, and



Figure 9. The NYA also undertook major projects, such as repairing Hovid Hall at the North Dakota State School of Forestry (now Dakota College at Bottineau). (Courtesy of Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota)

employed approximately 370 youth. They not only received excellent on-the-job training, but produced thousands of items vital to the army, such as bolts, gears, flanges, and castings.⁵⁴

Under this program need was entirely eliminated as a selection criterion and people were recruited for their aptitude as they had been in the defense training program. In fact, many youth left full-time jobs in order to obtain NYA training, obviously regarding it as an avenue to high-paying jobs in the defense industry. Nevertheless, quotas were difficult to fill, and massive recruiting drives were required. This led to increasing criticism, especially from vocational educators who objected strenuously to the fact that NYA recruits were paid while in training. The program also continued to lose its general base of public support. Like the CCC, it could not overcome its image as a relief agency, and with the return of prosperity people began to view it with suspicion.⁵⁵ These feelings of negativism were not shared by the trainees and their employers, however. Both groups believed the program was beneficial and worthwhile.⁵⁶

The death of the NYA occurred in the summer of 1943, just twelve months after that of the CCC. The debate had never really ceased. Enemies of the program termed it an inefficient and wasteful duplication of the efforts of public vocational education and an unnecessary vestige of the New Deal relief system. Friends pointed to the contributions that the agency was making to the war effort through

its training program, and as proof they cited the praise of war industry employers who had hired NYA trainees. They also attempted to remind the nation that the war would not last forever and that perhaps there would be a need for a federal youth program in the post-war era.⁵⁷

After lengthy committee hearings, the final debate on the NYA took place during June and July, 1943. The argument on both sides remained the same except that now, perhaps, they were presented with greater vigor and emotion. The House voted on July 2 and the Senate on July 3, and the NYA went down by votes of 176 to 197 and 33 to 39. Congressmen Usher Burdick and William Lemke and Senator William Langer supported the NYA and Senator Gerald Nye opposed it, although none of them participated in the debate.⁵⁸

At home public opinion also split. The vocational educators rejoiced, but most others were stunned. Those who worked in the NYA or still had projects in their communities were disappointed, but almost everyone else was unmoved or disinterested. The general disinterest was reflected by the press, which said little except to note the passing of yet another New Deal agency; one charitable comment in the *Grand Forks Herald* pointed out that in the midst of all the debate people had lost sight of the fact that the NYA had changed during its brief lifetime from a relief agency to an educational organization. Both

purposes were praiseworthy, but entirely separate and should be judged accordingly.⁵⁹

It is not difficult to understand the rapid demise of the CCC and the NYA between 1940 and 1943. Under the circumstances which prevailed, their continued existence could not have been expected, but it is nevertheless tragic that they did not survive. A need for such programs reappeared within a few years after the war and is especially acute today. The federal government has been forced to respond by creating numerous work and training programs based upon these New Deal prototypes. Perhaps if they had continued, if experience and commitment had continued to accumulate, the history of our more recent work relief efforts would not be so catastrophically bleak.

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