

*Blacks in the Civilian Conservation Corps:  
Successful Despite Discrimination*

by

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The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was created in March 1933, as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program. A relief agency designed to ease depression unemployment, the CCC accepted unemployed young men between the ages of 18 and 25 who were then placed in camps (or companies) throughout the United States, Puerto Rico, and the United States Virgin Islands. The camps were run along military lines and were headed by military officers. Since the agency was the first of its kind the military was a practical model to follow.<sup>1</sup>

In the camps the CCC boys, as they were known, did conservation work such as controlling soil erosion, planting trees, and building firebreaks and flood control systems. Recreation was also a healthy part of the CCC. All camps had sports teams, such as baseball or basketball, and enrollees could participate in musical skits and other entertainment.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, vocational and educational advisors were brought in to train and educate the young men, many of whom were illiterate. One of the initial recruits' experiences in camps, after going through drills on basic camp procedures, was to build their own heated and lighted barracks. The CCC did much to advance the boys' mental faculties and also furthered their physical condition; as most enrollees, having come from relief families, were undernourished. In addition, the CCC sent home \$25 to their families, bettering their economic conditions. Furthermore, it encouraged responsibility by having the boys manage the remaining five dollars of their monthly pay.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the CCC did much to improve the lives of enrollees and those of their families, both white and black, while also preserving and enhancing the natural resources of the United States. The CCC was a great success and probably the most popular New Deal agency.<sup>4</sup> However, the agency did have faults, one of which was its treatment of African-Americans, especially relating to enrollee selection and segregated camps. This paper will focus upon discrimination against blacks which resulted from official CCC policies.

The Act that created the CCC specifically stated that the CCC was not to discriminate on account of race, color or creed. This was a noble aspiration for a time when segregation was the norm. If handled well, the CCC could have done much to further race relations and improve the position of blacks in society. To the chagrin of Oscar De Priest, the black Representative (R. IL) who proposed the anti-discrimination clause in the CCC Act, the CCC limited both black enrollment and the number of black camps. Further discrimination resulted from the strict segregation of camps and restrictions upon black leadership positions. For blacks, much of the CCCs' potential was

lost. However, some blacks were able to challenge these obstacles and achieve success in the CCC.<sup>5</sup>

During the CCC's nine year history, there were around 100 black camps. These contained the majority of the 200,000 black enrollees and 30,000 black World War I veterans who worked at the camps. The CCC served about two million whites during those nine years. This small number of blacks seems unfortunate when related to the large number of blacks on relief.<sup>6</sup>

Black enrollment was limited through the use of a quota system which reflected the timbre of the times. This abuse of official procedure occurred in some areas of the North and predominated in the South. In much of the South, local officials did not select blacks for camps in spite of the fact that in 1933, black unemployment rates were double the national average. Beyond the general reasons for unemployment, the Depression had resulted in the loss of traditionally black jobs to whites and there were over two million blacks on relief, twice as many as there should have been based on population. The biased selection process graphically illustrates how the CCC limited its potential and why blacks had to fight to achieve any measure of success. In Georgia, where blacks comprised 36.8% of the total population, the selection process was especially biased; only Mississippi was worse. In Clarke Co. Georgia for example, with a black population of 60%, no blacks were ever enrolled. If they could not enroll, blacks certainly could not benefit from the CCC.<sup>7</sup>

Complaints about selection filtered up to black leaders, who addressed officials in the Department of Labor concerning the issue. As a result, the CCC Director of Selection, W. Frank Persons, took action against the discrimination, firmly believing it contrary to the intent and letter of the CCC Act. By applying consistent pressure and threatening to withhold funding, Persons was able to increase black enrollment throughout the South.<sup>8</sup>

However, black selection could only go so far because of political pressure. Although making up the larger portion of relief rolls, blacks by population only made up 10% of American society. In 1933, CCC Director Robert Fechner ordered that blacks would be allowed to comprise only 10% of CCC enrollees and would be confined to their home state. The directive applied to all states, no matter how large the percent of blacks in the population. This of course was very unfair, while it is true that Fechner was running a large, complex agency involving many different departments and had demands of greater concern to him than the conditions facing African Americans in a segregated society. Yet, accepting the realities of politics, one still can not help but wonder if Frank Persons had been the CCC Director would not events have been different.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the problem with black selection was due to community protest over black camps. When the CCC began, communities near to campsites were worried about the effects of having around 200 relief youths on their doorstep. Local communities felt sure that the rates of drunkenness and crime would increase. People did not want white, let alone black camps, even though blacks were placed in segregated camps under the supervision of white officers and foremen. The problem of camp placement was compounded when a camp was black. Communities close to proposed black camps wrote to authorities expressing fear for the safety of white women. With so many black



males nearby they were sure the women would be endangered. Director Fechner personally received many vigorous complaints from communities, especially in the North. The residents of Thornhurst, PA. campaigned against a black camp there on the grounds that women and girls on the way to and from their homes would have to pass by the enrollees. This, the protesters maintained, would lead to indecencies. The Hornell, N.Y. city council petitioned against the establishment of a camp there, on the grounds that "Hornell has no adequate facilities...for such a number of colored persons."<sup>10</sup>

When the CCC first started, locals used to set forest fires near the camps on weekends, so that the boys would have to work on their days off. However, once their own land had been saved from fire or flood, the locals quickly improved relations and asked for more camps. As time went on people across the nation realized it was an asset to have the CCC nearby and petitioned to get a camp in their community. Petitioning for camps of course applied more to white camps but there were parts of the country that considered themselves unprejudiced and specifically asked for black camps.

Paradoxically, these requests came most often from the South, perhaps because of familiarity with black laborers. Alabama had a thriving black camp system, and municipal officials and businessmen of Piedmont Alabama stated they "had no objection to a colored camp." People in Arkansas also accepted many black camps and residents of Lauren, GA successfully asked Fechner for a black camp to combat soil erosion. Furthermore, residents of Morton, MS stated they had had no trouble with their two black camps and believed that if other communities could see their high standard of work they would be glad to get them instead of some white camps. Fechner noted the validity of this adding that "The records show that negro camps are even better behaved than the white camps."<sup>11</sup>

As the problem of black camp placement continued, more black camps were moved to National Park Service or military installation land, in order to keep them far away from population centers and thereby mitigate protest. An arrangement which came into practice was that where there were not enough blacks to make up their own camp, they were attached to white camps. In New England there were about 250 blacks assigned to 68 white companies and similar conditions prevailed in most other areas. Integrated camps predominated except in the South, where strict segregation was enforced.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout 1933 black leaders continued to push for more black companies and some CCC officials did try by directing their surveyors to "Quietly, on the side, observe whether or not there would be any local objection to colored enrollees." A letter to the Southern Region head forester Richard Sondernegger acknowledges that "Since Louisiana has such a small proportion of Colored companies, a Colored company would be acceptable..."<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, it soon became obvious that despite Persons efforts some selection agents in the North and the majority of them in the South were definitely using a quota system to limit the number of blacks selected to even less than the official 10% and blacks also were not being placed in positions of authority. The Julius Rosenwald Fund investigated the matter and reported that in Florida 863 white youths had been selected compared to only 18 blacks. They further questioned that if that was not

discrimination, what was?14

Persons and his aide, Dean Snyder, along with various black associations, were persistent in their complaints against these blatant violations of the Act. Gaining access to President Roosevelt through Edgar Brown, CCC Special Consultant on Negro Affairs, who had been personally appointed by Roosevelt, Persons and the black groups were able to apply political pressure to Fechner and convinced him to have the Army investigate the matter of black selection quotas and to appraise the state of blacks in general.15

In 1934 the War Department instituted a major investigation in which the army disclosed differing practices in each corps area in regard to black selection and placement. The investigators determined that strict segregation was practiced only in the South, and integration prevailed most everywhere else. In addition, blacks had been sent out of their home states in most areas in direct opposition to Fechner's order. This had been done in order to create full black camps or to have blacks complete smaller white camps. The Army noted that these circumstances were somewhat unacceptable but cautioned against altering them because sustaining strictly segregated camps in all corps areas would lead to the need for more black camps and amplify the problem of their placement.16

Fechner's next directive flew squarely in the face of the Army recommendation. He ordered the immediate return of blacks to their home state and their replacement by whites, with strict segregation to be implemented in all corps areas. No deviations would be tolerated. The reason he gave for this total disregard of the investigations findings was that racial violence could be curbed only by strict segregation. However, racial violence had never been a problem in the CCC. In fact, there had been very few instances of it throughout the Corps. Fechner's actions actually compounded his predicament by swelling the need for black companies, while doing nothing to diminish the bigotry or outcries regarding the establishment of black camps. He would now have to buck community resentment rather than give in to it, and also would have to cope with the probable increase in racial tension between CCC boys and the locals. His actions did increase tensions and there were largely unprecedented outbreaks of racial conflict between the enrollees and locals who felt they were having camps forced on them.17

It is possible only to surmise why Fechner made such a contrary ruling but one must assume, based upon Fechner's self description as "a Southerner by birth and raising," who "clearly understood the Negro problem," that his personal biases played a large part in his decision. Perhaps the intermixing of races was just too alien to his upbringing, and he desired to bring "his" agency in line with his thought.18

Further finding of the Army verified the continuing complaints concerning selection quotas. Blacks were being accepted as Persons had demanded, but with a twist, as they were only being selected to fill the vacancies in black camps. The officials were up to their old tricks, for they well knew that there were few openings in black camps because blacks who made it into the CCC usually stayed in for a long length of time, years in most cases. Moreover, the black camps on military lands offered no additional openings because camp officials were using the same tactics. Thus, black camps on federal land did not, as intended, help the blacks' situation.19



The dual policies of strict segregation and confinement to one's home state led to even more grievances from black organizations. R.W. Bulloch, of the National Council of the Young Men's Christian Association of the U.S.A., wrote to Edgar Brown complaining about the lack of national black recreational facilities in general and specifically in Alabama, where there were fifteen parks for whites but none for "the large number of negro boys and girls." Bulloch asked if the situation could be remedied by a CCC project. Brown forwarded the letter to J.J. McEntee, acting Director of the CCC, who directed it to the attention of Fred Morrell, the Dept. of Agriculture Advisory Council CCC representative. Morrell responded that there was one recreational area for blacks in the United States, "Green Pastures", in Virginia. Of course the request was denied but Morrell wrote there was "contemplation of one camp in Tomahawk lake, Florida, but none were planned for Alabama."<sup>20</sup>

Fechner's new directives, coupled with the questionable methods of the selection agents, did indeed cause greater problems for Fechner, who was often taken to task for the unethical treatment of blacks. Governor Lehman of New York had an ongoing skirmish with Fechner, publicized in the pages of the New York Times. Lehman accused Fechner of intentionally limiting the selection of blacks because of personal prejudice. The statement could be backed up because in 1935 Fechner made yet another directive applicable nationwide. This one stated that blacks would only be allowed to fill vacancies in existing black companies. Lehman also said that the state of New York was above such behavior and specifically desired more black camps because New York had many deserving black men who could not be enrolled since Fechner's orders limited facilities for them. This war of words certainly did not help Fechner, because Lehman got the two camps with 380 black participants.<sup>21</sup>

Persons also continued to wage war against the quota, but it had become a losing battle now that the number of black camps was limited, and the potential for more severely curtailed. The policies of segregation and containment within the home state had effectively decreased the chances for black placement in the CCC.<sup>22</sup>

Facing the reality of the situation, black leadership redirected its major exertions toward advancing the positions of its constituents in the Corps, in hopes that segregated blacks could someday be commanded by African-Americans instead of whites. The main thrust of their efforts, in conjunction with the leaders of the CCC education program, who were progressives in a sea of conservative officials, went to secure black educational advisers. The educators within the CCC recommended that blacks should be the educational advisers in black camps. This met with resistance from Corps and Army officials who did not want the reins of power in black hands. The assistance of the U.S. Commissioner of Education, George F. Zook, was obtained, and he consulted the Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, to help him get compliance from the officers who were obstructing the recommendation. Ickes relayed the matter to the President. With Roosevelt's assent, Ickes wrote to George Dern, the Secretary of War, that FDR felt "that such appointments should be made," and so they were. This concession by the Army served to defuse the drive for black commanding officers, but the initiative had begun. Fourteen black educational advisers had been appointed by May of 1935, and more were pending.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, despite obstacles, blacks made inroads in obtaining better positions and gained the Presidents assistance in their push to get black medical reserve officers and chaplains called to active duty in the CCC. There was some resistance by the Army but by August 1936, twenty-five medical officers and chaplains had been called up.<sup>24</sup>

The continued persistence of black activists and Persons led to the opening of a black commanded camp in Elmira, NY. in 1937. This was a small victory however because with the approach of World War II, enrollment in the CCC by whites had begun to taper off. In 1937, to address this, Fechner ordered the reduction of all camps; black in proportion to white. This directive defies understanding because blacks still made up a higher percentage of the relief rolls since they were not being offered the civilian defense jobs. In addition, demonstrating the prevailing attitude of the CCC hierarchy in regard to black camps, by 1940, only one other black run company existed in addition to the Elmira camp.<sup>25</sup>

In all fairness to the CCC, men of all races who enrolled were trained in new skills and educated in a variety of subjects, from Architecture to X-rays and beyond. Moreover they were taken off the dole and given an opportunity to advance themselves and grow through responsibilities. In saving the land they saved themselves; learning pride and forgetting hopelessness. The CCC truly enabled the "boys" who went through it to come out men, ready to better their lot in life. Blacks also acquired these benefits, for although they were not dealt with fairly, blacks were treated better by their white CCC co-workers than by society at large. This was probably owing to the similar impoverished backgrounds of the enrollees and to strict CCC discipline. In fact of all the New Deal agencies, the two which operated with the least amount of discrimination were the National Youth Administration, led by the inspiring black woman, Mary Bethune, and the CCC.<sup>26</sup>

There are many success stories of blacks who improved their lives through experience gained in the CCC. The work ethics acquired in camps led to good jobs in private life. For Instance, Ernest Bell an assistant leader of a tractor crew, was recommended to the Union Bag & Timber Co. and went to Florida to accept a position with them. His good work and ability led to an increase in pay. Bell wrote to thank his Superintendent for the training he had received in the CCC. There were many similar stories. Gus Steed, while enrolled in the CCC, worked as a shipping clerk at the Brunswick Pulp and Paper Co., as it was being built. He did a great job and the company hired him to be a machine operator making over one hundred dollars a month. Brunswick wrote to the supervisors saying they were glad Steed had been recommended to them. Thus, the lessons learned in the CCC advanced these men, and other like them, to positions they would not have obtained otherwise. Luther C. Wandall, a black man who was in the CCC wrote, "On the whole, I was gratified rather than disappointed with the CCC. I had expected the worst. Of course it reflects to some extent the practices and prejudices of the U.S. Army. But as a job and an experience, for a man who has no work, I can heartily recommend it."<sup>27</sup>

Obviously, the CCC greatly improved the lives of the men who made it into the Corps, "making it in" being the operative phrase. It is unconscionable that the one program that really could have helped blacks was substantially denied them. Much of the



blame for the lack of black enrollees and the failure of blacks to obtain leadership posts must rest with the CCC Director, Robert Fechner. Through his directives and the selection agents' shenanigans, the CCC lost its potential, since most blacks were never given a chance to receive its benefits.<sup>28</sup>

Fechners' attitude seems to have been one of willful neglect, although he was straight forward in his dealings and did not make excuses as had many. Certainly the low black enrollment figures can be attributed to him because he would not back up Persons and force officials to comply with enrollment directives. His refusal to place black camps and his willingness to move them, at the first sign of opposition, was secondary to his general policy of obstruction. Fechners' allowing the Army's opposition to black company commanders well past the time when local communities had accepted the black camps near them demonstrates his basic inclination to keep blacks in their place. Originally, he had used white officers, following the military model, as a negotiating tool to defuse aversion to black camps, but it seems that as time passed Fechner became more restrictive in the measures he adopted concerning blacks. He himself initially had agreed with the use of blacks in integrated camps, as cooks and in similar black positions. Since Fechner died in 1939, after a lengthy illness, perhaps one can suppose that ill health may have affected his decisions.<sup>29</sup>

If a director of more progressive upbringing had been in charge the CCC might have reached its potential and improved the status of blacks. Fechner, opposing Army recommendations, enforced policies strictly segregating blacks and confining them to their home states, which clearly shows that he was not concerned with the plight of blacks. His ill conceived decisions reduced the number of black camps and limited the positions to which blacks could aspire. One must bear in mind however, that despite some local political pressure, Fechner was a product of the times and the vast majority of the nation was no more ready than he for the intermingling of the races.<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

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