

MEDIA REVIEW

CAMP FORGOTTEN: THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN MICHIGAN

Documentary film by William Jamerson

1993, Forgotten Films and Video

BIG SHOULDERS by William Jamerson

2007, Pine Stump Publishing

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Abstract

The Civilian Conservation Corps, a Depression-era federal program founded in 1933 as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, provides a unique example of a successful partnership-based government program. The CCC provided a win-win solution linking the needs of families experiencing poverty and unemployment with innovative approaches to land restoration. The young men who enrolled in the camps helped to restore natural resources, build roads and park structures, fight fires, and plant trees. They worked hard for their earnings, building confidence and self-respect, and matured from boys to men. This is a review of the documentary film *Camp Forgotten: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Michigan*, and the historical novel *Big Shoulders*, both by Bill Jamerson.

Key Words: Civilian Conservation Corps; Great Depression; American history; poverty; natural resources; Franklin D. Roosevelt; federal programs; partnership

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Camp Forgotten: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Michigan, a one-hour documentary film written and produced in 1993 by Bill Jamerson, features archival footage from the 1930s and interviews with former Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrollees who worked in the camps in the state of Michigan.

Big Shoulders, written by Bill Jamerson, is a historical novel set in Camp Raco, Michigan, that traces the journey of one young man and his experience as a CCC recruit. Both tell a colorful story of hard work, hope and achievement at a turning point in U.S. history.

HAVENS IN THE WILDERNESS

In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, severe economic hardship affected millions of families; at the same time, agricultural and forest lands were being mismanaged and were no longer productive. Newly inaugurated US president Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) proposed a set of programs, agencies, and policies he called the New Deal, that included various public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations. These included the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Social Security Administration, the Civil Works Administration, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA), among others (<https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Deal>, 2020).

The programs were designed to meet three central needs: relief for the poor and unemployed, economic recovery, and systemic reforms designed to prevent a future economic depression². Unemployment was at an all-time high of 24.9% in 1933 (Amadeo & Anderson, 2020), and jobs were scarce. On March 31, 1933, FDR signed the Federal Unemployment Relief Act, which recruited healthy unmarried young men to join what would become known as the Civilian Conservation Corps or CCC (Roos, 2020). The CCC, in operation from 1933 to 1942, was a life-saving opportunity for young men aged 17-

28, some of whom were desperate to support their families. The CCC was a stabilizing factor for families and communities. The money that went back into the home communities, and to the Local Experienced Men who taught classes at the camps, was sometimes literally staving off starvation.

The Civilian Conservation Corps took unemployed young men—fed them, housed them, and gave them work. It taught them job skills and provided evening classes. It cared for virtually all of their material needs. But the CCC was something much more. The camps were a haven in the wilderness, far from a society threatened with anarchy. The camps were a safety valve for small towns and big cities taming with thousands of unemployed youth. It took in these young men and made them more responsible and more disciplined. It made them stronger—physically and morally. But most of all, it helped them discover their true potential as productive citizens, and renewed their faith in the democratic system. And in the process, it turned boys into men. (Jamerson, 2007)

It should be noted that the camps were for men only, and mostly white men. In Michigan, camps were originally racially mixed, but in response to racist remarks by enrollees (mentioned in *Camp Forgotten*), new black-men-only CCC camps were created. Additionally, the nation's only Native American CCC camp, Camp Marquette, was established in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

These timely federal programs were a unique example of emergent, thoughtful, successful, well-organized government intervention, implemented with care and integrity. The Civilian Conservation Corps is an example of a historical partnership-based government program that transformed the lives of the young men who worked in the camps and generated consistent economic resources for their families, as well as paid income for the Local Experienced Men, while improving forest lands for generations to come.

CAMP FORGOTTEN: THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS IN MICHIGAN

The 1993 documentary film produced by Bill Jamerson, *Camp Forgotten: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Michigan*, features archival footage of young men working in Michigan's CCC camps as well as firsthand recollections by men who served in the camps in their youth.

In this documentary, we learn that the funds to create and maintain the camps were provided by the federal government, and the camps were built and run by the U.S. Army, administered by decommissioned officers. The work crews planted hundreds of thousands of coniferous trees (in camp contests, boys planted 100 tree seedlings in 15 minutes), built roads and state park structures, fought forest fires, aided communities affected by floods and natural disasters, and restored natural resources. Local Experienced Men, often unemployed loggers, were hired to teach the young recruits how to construct log buildings and do carving (for example, ornamental details of fireplaces) and stone masonry, and generally “show them the ways of the woods”. Enrollees took educational classes at night, and learned valuable skills that would qualify them for jobs later.

The CCC camps were located in remote areas, often 20 miles or more from the nearest town. On weekends, the boys went on excursions into the surrounding wilderness. Harry Andrews, a former member of Camp Superior, recollects a winter adventure: “We walked in our snowshoes about 8 miles to the falls. On the trip we saw moose tracks, and a bear den. Cold weather had formed an ice bridge and we could actually walk under the falls.” Camp recruits worked hard, ate well, and got in shape. During the first six months, the average recruit gained 6-20 pounds. Leo Wilson, who served at Camp Pioneer, recalled: “The food couldn't have been too bad—except the eggs were kind of blue sometimes and once and a while they had feathers in it—but I gained 30 pounds in two years.”

Young men often came from first-generation immigrant families. Fred Haskin, a former CCC worker, commented,

There was no such thing as the average enrollee. CCC boys were from many backgrounds and placed in a different environment. Faced for the first time with being alone, apron strings were severed. It was a sink or swim situation for each boy. We had some ethnic groups that had problems mixing together. We had a Polish fellow, Italian, Finns, Swedes, and a few Indians. The Detroit Italians were prejudiced against the Upper Peninsula Italians, but everything worked out. When such diverse people live, sleep, work, and play together, they are bound to come to some understanding. I know I learned from each of them. And many opinions I had grown up with were changed. (Jamerson, 1993).

Camp Forgotten celebrates the successes of the Civilian Conservation Corps programs in Michigan from 1933 to 1942. The program's operations were guided by partnership values and caring relationships that shaped young men's lives. The CCC was a government/civilian reciprocally beneficial project that met an economic need; benefited young men, their families, and the local communities; and left a lasting legacy in the restored viability of the land for recreation and natural resources.

In the CCC, the enrollees were more than paid workhorses or social capital—they were nurtured and respected as individuals with their own minds, hearts, dreams, and talents. They experienced a sense of belonging in a new family: in the daily regimen of camp life they gained self-respect and learned new skills under the direction of camp supervisors who served as caring adults and positive role models. The wilderness setting of the CCC camps brought a challenging, living vibrancy to their world, particularly for those who were city dwellers. The men gave their energy and sweat to the land—their sense of accomplishment created a legacy that would provide natural resources and enjoyment to park visitors into the future. Bill Fraser, from Camp Jumbo, said, “The

most important thing I learned at the CCC camp is that we can work for a living, and we can be rewarded for what we do.”

BIG SHOULDERS

In the historical novel *Big Shoulders*, Nick Radzinski, a young man from Hamtramck, a city within the boundaries of Detroit, Michigan, chooses between a life on the streets stealing to survive and an opportunity to join the CCC. At the urging of his probation officer, Nick signs up for the program, waves goodbye to his mom and brother, climbs on a truck with other boys, and leaves city life for the great unknown.

At Camp Raco in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Nick gets paid to work hard for an initial term of six months planting trees, building roads, and constructing a state park superintendent’s house. He lives in camp with 200 other young men aged 17-28, all from families on relief.

In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, welfare programs didn’t make ends meet, and jobs were not available for young people. After several of his siblings died and his father fell into a depression, lost his job, and then left the family, Nick’s mother was struggling in her waitressing job to put food on the table. The federal government payed Nick \$30 a month—a dollar a day. The program sent \$25 of his wages back to his mother, and he kept \$5 a month to spend. Everything he needed was provided by the CCC: shelter, food, clothing, transportation, medical care, vocational skills classes, and entertainment on weekends.

Nick quickly learns that there are consequences for not following camp rules—his rebellious nature gets him into all sorts of trouble. At home on the street, Nick has had to survive on his own wits, but camp life is different—here there is room for self-authority but within the container of the camp structure and under the guidance of

older, experienced officers who practice a dedicated “tough love”, shaping Nick into the responsible man he is becoming.

Camp values were built on a foundation of self-respect, tolerance, integrity, hard work and perseverance. Boys came of age in the camps, made friends for life, and received guidance from adult mentors, including the officers, Local Experienced Men, and vocational skills teachers. They earned not only wages, but a sense of honor and belonging. Nick reflects:

The people, places and things in my life seemed unimportant compared to the serenity I felt in the woods. Life in the big city offered the promise of happiness, but here I felt *fulfilled*. In the city it was all about getting things— here it was experiencing things. That angry teenager back in Hamtramck who cheated and stole seemed like a different person. (Jamerson, 2007, p. 55).

CONCLUSION

In the film *Camp Forgotten* and the novel *Big Shoulders*, Bill Jameson brings to life a forgotten world of the everyday experience of men living and working in the Civilian Conservation Corps camps in Michigan. Young men arrived hungry and underweight, with little or no money and few job prospects, and left at the end of their enlistment healthy, with the earnings of their hard work, new friends, valuable job skills, confidence and self-respect, and hope for a better life for themselves and their families. In challenging physical conditions, they gained resilience, learned trust and perseverance, built lasting relationships with their guiding officers and local civilians, and cultivated a relationship with the land.

The CCC, the WPA, and other Depression-era federal programs were built on partnership values of care, mutual respect, and empowering one another to do their best. Directed by the thoughtful leadership of Roosevelt and supported by government and state

agencies, the Army, and local communities, the CCC proved to be an innovative solution to a social crisis and a broken national economic system.

The CCC camps' success was nurtured by caring relationships, one young man at a time, as portrayed in the story of Nick and his coming-of-age experience at Camp Raco. As a former enrollee shares in *Camp Forgotten*: “Back in 1937, I set my sails when I joined the CCC camp. I was taught respect, discipline, and how to treat my fellow man. I wouldn't take nothin' for the experience I learned in the CCC” (Jamerson, 1993).

In the 21st century, do we have the ingenuity and foresight to create government programs that are not defined by domination patterns, but are informed by a new systems literacy and thrive on the momentum of sustained partnership values? The Green New Deal, proposed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Senator Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts (Friedman, 2019), is a recent example of a federal program that is intended to serve people and planet through linked, generative, far-sighted, community-empowering solutions. In the age of COVID and social distancing, the close camaraderie of a residential work camp may not be realistic. But there are a myriad of possible creative government-backed partnership solutions to economic inequity, social unrest, food insecurity, racial injustice, and climate change. Commitment to a fair democratic process and to an economy informed by social wealth metrics and caring human relationships can bring people together and heal what is broken, actualizing a partnership world. As the CCC motto states, “We Can Do It!”

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