

CORPS VALUES

From the rock retaining wall on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon to the intricate trails in Chiricahua National Monument, it's easy to see the positive effects of the Civilian Conservation Corps. But maybe more important was the effect it had on the thousands of young men who enrolled in the program, including Elson Alvarez and the other 41,000 enrollees who worked in Arizona. **BY KATHY MONTGOMERY**



Elson Alvarez saw electric lights for the first time in the Civilian Conservation Corps. He was 19.

Now 96, Alvarez looks over the land where his final camp stood. The site in Flux Canyon is not far from his home in Nogales.

“See that building over there?” he says. “That used to be clothes and shoes and all that stuff. It’s still there.”

Not much else is left of the sprawling camp that housed 200 enrollees: a few concrete foundations, a fire pit and a rock-and-mortar trough built to store coal. If you look closely at the trough, you can just make out a worn inscription on a stone plaque with the company and camp number.

Many of the enrollees who served here were farm boys who hadn’t finished high school. Alvarez had an eighth-grade education. His father was growing cotton in Texas when the Great Depression hit.

“We just couldn’t make it,” Alvarez says. “We had frijoles three times a day for about two weeks one time. So I joined. April 23, 1936.”

In all, Alvarez spent five and a half years with the CCC working on a survey crew, first in St. David, then at this camp near Patagonia. He helped build dams and stock tanks, ran phone lines and cut roads.

The CCC changed his life. His family back in Texas built a home with the money he earned. During his time in St. David, he met a young Easterner named John F. Kennedy, who was



Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees attach wire to a telephone line in the Grand Canyon in 1935.

COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

working on the J-6 Ranch where Alvarez's crew was surveying. While living at Flux Canyon, Alvarez met his wife. The CCC gave him an education and job skills.

"I'd say 100 percent or maybe 98 percent of the CCC boys will say what I'm saying to you: 'That's the best thing that ever happened to me.'"

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected in 1933, the country was in the grip of the worst economic depression in the nation's history. More than 25 percent of adult males were unemployed, 40 percent of the nation's mortgages were in default and the entire U.S. financial system was in disarray. Also, the land had been devastated by the drought that created the Dust Bowl.

In his first 100 days in office, Roosevelt launched what would become the Civilian Conservation Corps. Intended to conserve the country's natural and human resources, the CCC was open to single men ages 17 to 28. They were given "three hots and a cot" and paid \$30 a month, \$25 of which was sent home to their families. In the nine and a half years it existed, the "Three C's" became the largest peacetime mobilization of young men in U.S. history. And it's hard to overstate its impact. Eighty years since its creation in April 1933, hardly a town exists where the CCC's projects do not survive.

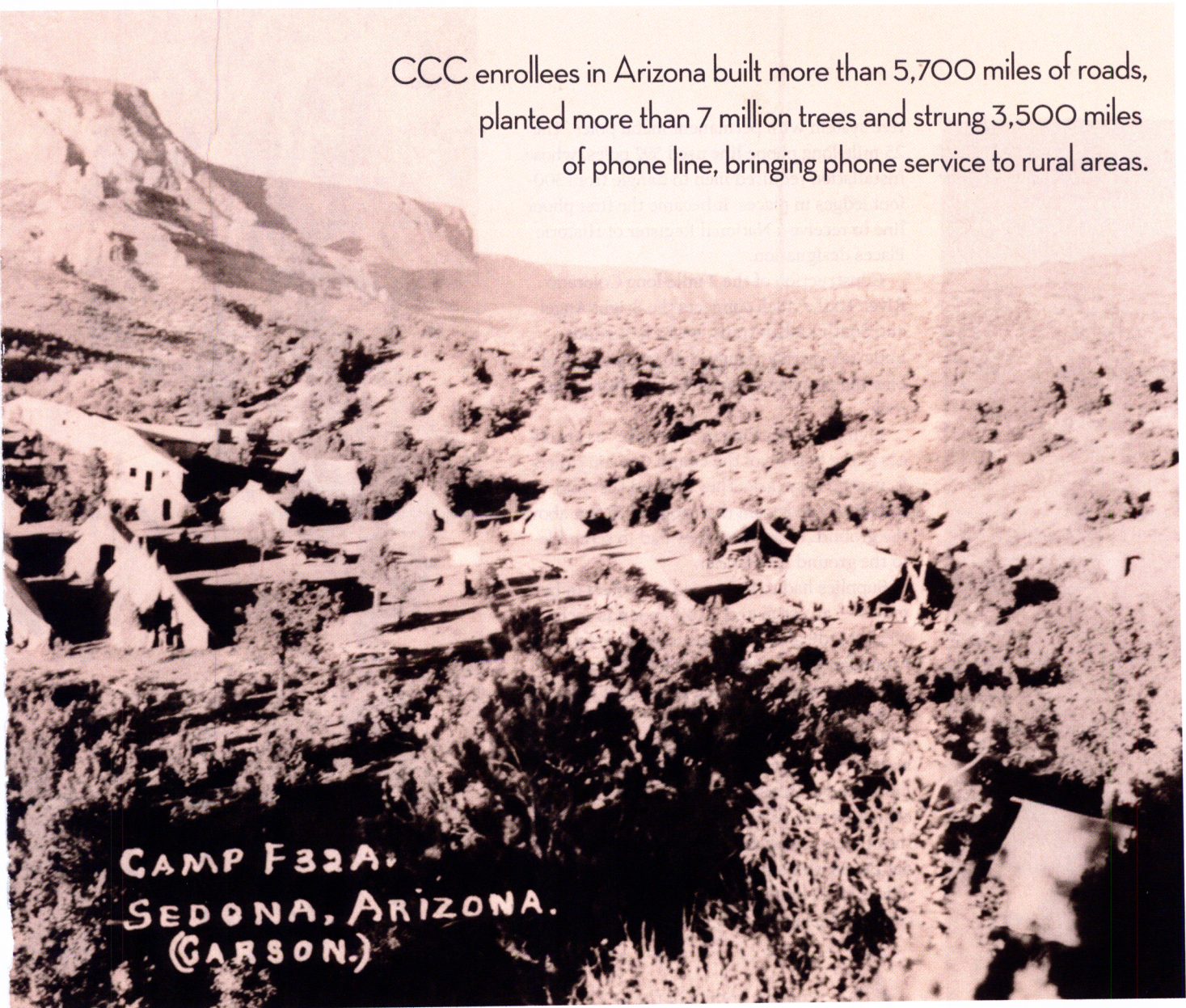


Enrollees arrived at Arizona's first two camps in May 1933: one near Globe, the other near Safford. In all, Arizona would be home to 50 camps, located in every part of the state.

A rural economy and an abundance of government-administered land made the young state of Arizona an ideal place for CCC projects. And unlike many other states, enrollees in Arizona could work year-round, with many companies rotating from the desert in the winter to the northern forests in the summer.

The CCC put more than 41,000 Arizona men to work. Supplemented by men largely from New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Pennsylvania, CCC enrollees in Arizona built more than 5,700 miles of roads, planted more than 7 million trees and strung 3,500 miles of phone line, bringing phone service to rural areas. Their

CCC enrollees in Arizona built more than 5,700 miles of roads, planted more than 7 million trees and strung 3,500 miles of phone line, bringing phone service to rural areas.



ABOVE: In Sedona and Oak Creek Canyon, the CCC built trails, campgrounds and fences, and worked to control erosion. Years after the camp featured in this photograph was abandoned, it was used as a set for Hollywood films.

NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY,
CLINE LIBRARY

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Colossal Cave camp featured four barracks, including this one, which housed 50 men.

COLOSSAL CAVE MOUNTAIN PARK

allotments sent more than \$3.5 million home to their families, and the purchase of food and other supplies pumped nearly \$59 million into the state's economy.

Eighteen of the camps in Arizona were U.S. Forest Service camps that built fire towers, roads, trails, ranger stations and campgrounds. They opened up the White Mountains to tourism and helped develop Flagstaff's Snowbowl ski resort.

Next were the 15 Soil Conservation camps, like the one near Patagonia, which worked to conserve water and soil and improve rangelands.

A handful of camps operated in parks and monuments. CCC companies developed Colossal Cave Mountain Park and made significant contributions to Chiricahua National Monu-

ment, Saguaro National Park, South Mountain Park in Phoenix and Hualapai Mountain Park near Kingman, among others. Enrollees from the Mt. Elden camp worked on Wupatki and Walnut Canyon national monuments.

Four CCC companies completed as many as 250 projects at Grand Canyon National Park. CCC enrollees built the rock retaining wall that runs from Verkamp's Visitor Center to Lookout Studio, rerouted and widened the Bright Angel Trail, and built rest houses. They cleared Bright Angel Campground (the former CCC camp) and planted the cottonwoods that give the area much of its character.

The CCC's most impressive achievements at the Canyon include the construction of the Colorado River Trail and the trans-canyon phone line, which replaced the old tree-to-

See More of the CCC

To hear presentations by CCC historians and see photos, artifacts and camp newspapers, make plans to attend the *Civilian Conservation Corps Recognition Day: Honoring the Work of the CCC in Arizona*. The event takes place on Saturday, April 6, from 3 to 6 p.m., at the Coconino County Public Library, 300 W. Aspen Avenue, in Flagstaff. For more information, call 928-779-7670.

tree system with permanent metal poles. The 25-mile-long phone line used 592 poles, whose installation required men to dangle from 300-foot ledges in places. It became the first phone line to receive a National Register of Historic Places designation.

Construction of the 2-mile-long Colorado River Trail, which connects the Bright Angel and South Kaibab trails, was a hazardous undertaking that required 40,000 pounds of blasting powder to carve the trail from solid rock.

Living and working in “the hole,” as enrollees at the bottom of the Grand Canyon called it, was no easy task. They crossed the Colorado River on a tram that stopped 75 feet above the ground. From there they had to scramble to the ground on a ladder.

Supplies had to be carried or packed in by mules — an estimated 30,000 pounds each week. Medical evacuations took place by “ambulance mule,” a four-hour ordeal that some compared to driving fast on flat tires.

Even recreation required work. To get a pool table, 25 men dismantled a table at the rim and carried it down in pieces, including three 150-pound sections of slate. And one enrollee claimed it was part of his job to buy liquor for the officers, a task that required him to hike out the South Kaibab Trail, hitchhike to the village for 12 pints of Old Corky, and return to camp by 4 p.m.

A separate branch of the CCC operated on Arizona’s Indian reservations, where conditions had become severe. By 1933, per capita income among Indians in the Southwest had dropped to \$81 per year, leaving many on the brink of starvation. Conditions on Indian lands became more difficult as tribal members living off the reservation returned when they couldn’t find work. Meanwhile, the landscape suffered from overgrazing by expanding herds of sheep, goats and horses.

Roosevelt approved the CCC-Indian Division in April 1933, with 43 camps planned for Arizona and New Mexico. The CCC-ID performed much of the same work as the rest of the CCC, but operated under the Bureau of Indian Affairs with very different rules. While most CCC enrollees signed on for six-month commitments, Indian workers had no con-



tracts. Camps were smaller than the typical 200-man camps. Some were family camps, and many tribal members lived at home and commuted to work. Also, while enrollees had to be free of communicable diseases, age and disability did not automatically disqualify them.

Participation was particularly high among Navajos, who filled their quotas, while many other tribes failed to fill half of their positions. Much of the work on reservations involved soil and water conservation. But CCC-ID workers also built roads and trails at Canyon de Chelly National Monument, constructed a home for the first permanent ranger at Navajo National Monument and built the Navajo Nation Council Chamber, using a design based on the hogan.

On the Fort Apache Reservation, tribal





ABOVE: CCC enrollees construct a trail to the Colorado River within the Grand Canyon in 1934.

COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

OPPOSITE PAGE: CCC blacksmith John Pritchett (left) in his shop at Colossal Cave with an unidentified fellow enrollee. COLOSSAL CAVE

MOUNTAIN PARK

members helped excavate and restore Kin- ishba Ruins and built a small museum and residence there.

Like the rest of the CCC, the CCC-ID shifted its focus to national defense in later years, with enrollees studying trades such as radio operations and sheet-metal work. By the end of 1942, of 11,000 Indians in the armed forces, 6,400 were former CCC-ID enrollees. Another 8,000 took jobs related to war production.

Education became an important component of the CCC. Few enrollees had completed high school, and as many as 2.5 million were illiterate. Eventually, every camp received an educational advisor,

often an unemployed teacher or professor.

It was his job to set up classes based on the needs and desires of the men in his camp. Enrollees could take academic classes, as well as a variety of vocational courses intended to help them find work as civilians. At Walnut Canyon, enrollees could take courses in carpentry and bricklaying. At the Grand Canyon, they studied the Canyon's biology and geology, in addition to trades like auto mechanics.

It was the educational opportunities that kept Elson Alvarez in the program.

Dinner was served at 5 p.m. From 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., he attended classes.

"Whatever we wanted to take," he recalls. "I wanted to learn more surveying, you know? So I became an assistant leader. I just kept studying and I became a leader — the survey crew leader."

With each promotion, he earned more money. He took photography classes and opened a camp photography concession, which gave him income on the side.

As the CCC was winding down during the buildup to World War II, it was a letter of recommendation signed by the camp engineer and project superintendent that got him a job with Citizens Utilities Co. in Nogales. He worked there for 40 years, retiring as power plant superintendent.

Like many of his fellows, Alvarez also went on to serve in World War II. His first drill instructor was a CCC alumnus, actor Robert Mitchum.

"He was showing us how to fix up beds," Alvarez says. "So when he saw me fixing up the bed, [he asked], are you an ex-soldier or a Triple-C boy? I told him, and then he shook my hand and we sat together and talked for about an hour and a half."

Alvarez used the photography skills he learned in the CCC in the Army Air Corps, serving in Panama as a press photographer. He believes the war would have lasted longer had it not been for all the CCC enrollees who served.

"We were very famous during the Great Depression," he says. "Then World War II broke out and we became obscure. But now it seems people are moving to tell what happened and why. Who was responsible and why the Great Depression was over."

For more about Elson Alvarez and to view a video of his CCC experience, visit www.arizonahighways.com/extras.asp. 