

The Fort Payne C.C.C. Camp

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On March 4, 1929, when Republican Herbert Hoover was inaugurated President of the United States, the Jazz Age economic boom of the 1920s was in full force. F. Scott Fitzgerald called it “an age of miracles...of art, ...of excess,...of satire.....the wildest of all generations.”¹ The Age was one of the automobile, of radio, of prohibition and speakeasies, and of flappers who danced the Charleston, cut their hair, shortened their skirts, and smoked cigarettes in public.

Fueled by new industries and new products, the American economy roared along with little hint that success and prosperity were not permanent. Only the South and the debt-blanketed farm belt which suffered from the fall of farm prices after World War I, marred the ambience of well-being, and only a few voices dared to warn of disaster as the spiraling “Bull Market” marched upward. The crash came suddenly when the English, trying to lure European capital

¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” Scribner’s Magazine 90: (November 1931): 5.

back to Great Britain, raised their interest rates. As foreign investors dumped their shaky American securities on the New York market, panic ensued and an orgy of stock selling followed.²

The stock market collapse ushered in the Great Depression and the hit song of the Twenties, “My God How The Money rolls In,” gave way to “Brother ,Can You Spare A Dime?” In rapid succession, banks failed, taking with them the savings of millions; factories shut down, farm and home mortgages were foreclosed, real estate prices collapsed, and unemployment skyrocketed. Welfare funds were strained as bread lines and soup kitchens appeared all across America. The surprising thing was not so much that the panic had occurred (the United States had suffered many economic recessions and recovered from them all), but that this depression continued to deepen and that it lasted so long. The purchasing power of farmers and laborers, reduced in the 1920s, vanished after 1930. President Hoover, confident in the ability of the free market capitalistic system to recover, failed to appreciate the dire conditions of the economy or the suffering of the people. ³

Although in Alabama the prosperity of the Jazz Age was uneven, and never was as abundant as in areas outside the south, the state did prosper before the 1929 stock market crash. In 1927 Alabama elected Bibb Graves governor, and he developed a liberal spending program. The Alabama legislature, under Graves’s executive leadership, abolished the convict lease system, raised teachers’ salaries, built roads, constructed school houses and lengthened the

²Two excellent accounts of the depression and its causes are Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order (Boston: Houghton Miffling company, 1967), and John Kenneth Galbraith, The Great Crash (Boston: houghton Mifflin Company, 1954).

³ unknown

school year.⁴ Graves's spending spree was ended by the depression, and he left his successor, Governor Benjamin M. Miller who became governor in 1931, with a debt of \$15,000,000.⁵ Alabama's traditional sources of income were gone, but demands for welfare and social services continues to be heavy as unemployment increased. Under Miller's leadership Alabama ratified constitutional amendments adding an inheritance and an income tax to increase state revenue, and the legislature enacted the Fletcher Budget Control Act to prevent state agencies from spending more money than the state had appropriated or collected in revenue, thus forcing the state budget into proration whenever there was a short-fall of funds.⁶

Although Al Smith's nomination in 1928 as the Democratic candidates caused a heavy Republican vote in Alabama, four years later the state gave a land slide victory to Democratic candidate Franklin Delano Roosevelt who gave Alabamians hope by promising them a "New Deal." Roosevelt's inauguration on March 4, 1933, began the famous "ONE Hundred Days" when an impressive list of new legislation was enacted.

These laws were designed to bring relief to millions of unemployed Americans, to allow recovery of industry and to force reform of business and banking so a reoccurrence of such a severe stock market crash and panic could be prevented. Roosevelt first solved the banking crisis, recommended that Congress enact the Beer Act while the repeal of prohibition went forward and requested an agricultural bill to raise farmers' purchasing power. Later he presented

⁴ William E. Gilbert, "Bibb Graves as a Progressive, 1927-1930," The Alabama Review 10 (January 1957), pp. 15-30.

⁵ John Craig Stewart, The Governors of Alabama (Greta, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing company, 1975), p. 180

⁶ Malcolm C. McMillan, The Land Called Alabama (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1975), 361, 364-66; Daniel Savage Gray and J. Barton Starr, Alabama: A Place, A People, A Point of View (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt Publishing Company, 1977), 216-17.

Congress with an unemployment relief bill which included a civilian conservation corps. While governor of New York, Roosevelt initiated a program putting ten thousand unemployed men to work on reforestation. In his speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination, FDR suggested sending a million of the nation's youth into the countryside to plant trees.⁷ Soon after his election, Roosevelt discussed his plan with Professor Nelson C. Brown of the New York State college of Forestry and sent Rexford G. Tugwell to Washington to talk with major R. Y. Stuart, chief of the U.S. Forest Service. ⁸

During the first week of his presidency, Roosevelt pressed for a bill incorporating his reforestation program. On March 19, he summoned the Secretaries of War and Interior, their legal officers, and several others to a White House conference where he discussed his ideas to employ 5,000,000 men to improve forests by planting trees and working to control floods. In this meeting the president talked, his ideas coming rapidly. Then he paused, handed the gentlemen a one -page memorandum, and requested a bill by 9:00 P.M. that night. When they returned with a draft, Roosevelt made only a few changes. For the next few days, the cabinet and FDR's advisors--known as the "Brain Trust"--discussed the details of the president's program, which called for enrolling unemployed youth whose families were destitute. The young men were to receive free food, clothing, and housing and \$30 a month. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins had serious objections to wages of only one dollar a day, fearing it would drive down the price of free labor and cause organized labor to oppose the bill. ⁹

⁷William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1922-1940 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 11.

⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 336-37.

⁹ Frank Freidel, FDR: Launching the New Deal (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 256-58.

On March 15 Roosevelt announced his forestry program at a press conference, and four days later asked Raymond Morley, one of the “Brain Trust,” to draft a message to Congress for him. The President revised and polished the paper twice before sending it over to Capitol Hill on March 21. The nation focused its attention on the pending farm bill, while the Unemployment Relief Act which created the Civilian Conservation Corps was debated in Congress.

The president exerted personal pressure, influencing Congress to pass the bill. William Green, the president of the American Federation of Labor, objected to the \$30 a month salary, and socialist Norman Thomas declared that “Work-camps fit into the psychology of a Fascist.” Republican conservatives were opposed, as were two Southern congressmen, Lister Hill of Alabama and John J. McSwain of South Carolina, who feared giving the president such vast discretionary powers as provided for in the act.¹⁰ Roosevelt defended the proposal’s integrity at a press conference and explained its merits to the members of the House and Senate labor committees during a special evening meeting at the White House. Secretary of Labor Perkins interpreted the bill eloquently before congressional committees, and Army Chief of Staff Douglas MacArthur assured Congress that “there would be no military training whatsoever.” On March 29 the Senate passed the C.C.C. bill by a voice vote. On the House floor black Congressman Oscar De Priest of Illinois amended the bill to prohibit discrimination “on account of race, color, or creed,” and by voice vote, the House passed the bill. The Senate accepted the House amendment and after Roosevelt signed the act of March 31, the Civilian Conservation Corps was born.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., 261-62. John A. Salmond, The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1967), pp. 10-12, 17-22.

¹¹ James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), 169-70; Schlesinger, Jr., Coming of the New Deal, 20-21; Salmond, C.C.C., pp. 22-23.

Roosevelt appointed Robert Fechner, vice-president of the Machinists Union, to head the C.C.C., and this prevented further labor union hostility toward the program.¹²

Despite some problems regarding the delegation of authority and administrative bottlenecks, mostly in the White House, the Department of Labor began to enroll recruits while the Forestry Service of the Department of Interior designed the projects, and the U.S. Army constructed and operated the camps.¹³ Never before had the federal government sponsored a program which cut across so many executive departments, and despite predictions of doom, the program succeeded.¹⁴

There were several reasons why the C.C.C. was so successful. Everyone in Washington knew that this program was close to the President's heart and had his wholehearted endorsement. His personal secretary, Louis Howe, was given responsibility for its early organization and this meant daily access to the President's office. Colonel Duncan Major from the War Department was placed in charge of Army operations and did a brilliant job coordinating the opening of the camps.

While Washington was pressing ahead to iron out the administrative details of the program, state welfare and relief agencies began to organize. Selection agents were hired to recruit young men who met the federal guidelines. Men who were interested in joining the program were required to fill out an application form and were then interviewed. Those eligible had to be between the ages of 18 and 25 (although later the age was dropped to 17 and raised to

¹² Salmond, C.C.C., p. 27.

¹³ Perry H. Merrill, Roosevelt's Forest Army: A History of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942 (Montpelier, Vermont: 1981), pp. 4-6.

¹⁴ Fred E. Leake, (editor) Roosevelt's Tree Army, A Brief History of the Civilian Conservation Corps (n.p., n.d.), p. 1.

28); they were to be physically fit, unemployed, unmarried, have family dependents and be willing to send an allotment home to their parents.¹⁵

In Fort Payne, Alabama, there was considerable effort on the part of local government and business officials to obtain a C.C.C. camp in DeKalb County. While this campaign went forward, local welfare officials began to recruit local men for the C.C.C. Raymond Lyles, the director of DeKalb County relief work, was responsible for recruitment, and he was ably assisted by a number of ladies, including Mrs. Leslie Leto Shaw and Mrs. Louise Van Allen. Mrs. Shaw was once a columnist for the New Yorker magazine. The federal government required that all applicants sign their own forms. Many of the young men who came in could not sign their names. Mrs. Van Allen would write each name on a slip of paper, give the boys a quick lesson in penmanship and tell them to go home, practice and come back in the morning and sign their names to the forms.¹⁶

After the boys were selected, they were taken by the U.S. Army to a nearby army base for physical examinations and a brief indoctrination program. The army issued the boys uniforms, but required no military training. Because of the forced labor camps and the youth indoctrination organizations of the European totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Mussolini, the U.S. Congress and President Roosevelt made certain the Army understood there was to be no military training whatsoever; however, many of the young men who went through the C.C.C. program were later drafted in the World War II conscriptions. Surely the C.C.C. training and the discipline of camp life helped them adjust to military bases and wartime conditions.

¹⁵ Memorandum for the Secretary of War, April 3, 1933, Louis Howe Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; American Youth Commission, The Civilian Conservation Corps, (Washington, D.C.: 1940), pp. 4-6.

¹⁶ Personal interview with Mrs. Louise Van Allen, October 1987.

On June 7, 1933, the Fort Payne Journal reported that the DeKalb County quota had been reached and that 79 local boys were at Camp McClellan and Fort Benning for training.¹⁷ On June 14 Emmett Kuykendall and William Miller, both of C.C.C. Company 1419, wrote to Mrs. Shaw from Columbus, Georgia, and reported that the conditions at Fort Benning were good. They were eating well, feeling good, were healthy and were doing a little work.¹⁸

Not all the DeKalb County boys were assigned to the same company. The Fort Payne Journal printed a letter from Carl Pickens on May 24, 1933. Pickens had been assigned to Company 464 at Fort McClellan. He reported that he got up at 6:00 A.M., ate breakfast at 6:30, answered roll call at 8:00, worked until 11:30; he ate lunch at noon, then worked again from 1:00 P.M. until 3:00. Lights were out by 9:00 P.M.¹⁹

Pickens wrote that “boys are coming into camp fast” and there are “about 1,800 here now.” He reported that there were four Fort Payne boys at the camp: himself, A.V. Reed, Robert Wheeler, and Ernest Thurman. He had been assigned as the first aid man in the medical group, Thurman was the company clerk, while Wheeler was appointed squad leader. At the end of his letter, Pickens noted that Howard Gilbreath, another Fort Payne boy, had just arrived at McClellan.

In this same issue, the Journal printed a letter from Ernest Thurman to Raymond Lyle, the director of DeKalb relief work. Thurman estimated that there were two to three thousand boys at

¹⁷ Fort Payne Journal, June 7, 1933.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, June 14, 1933.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, May 24, 1933.

Fort McClellan, including 500 Negroes and 800 boys from Mississippi. He was enjoying the good baseball games they were having.²⁰

Many of the fort Payne boys were assigned to Company 472 which was organized at McClellan on May 20, 1933. According to B. J. Moody's "History of Company 472," there were 209 members and three officers. The company was first assigned to Chula, Georgia, to work with the U.S. Forestry Service there. They constructed a camp site in a pecan grove and began to make fire lanes through the forest. During this time, they were called out to fight a dangerous forest fire. Fort Payne boys fought forest fires some eighteen months before President Roosevelt signed a special presidential order allowing C.C.C. boys to be used in forest fire control.²¹

By the first of October the forestry service had completed preliminary plans for a state park on Lookout Mountain and a C.C.C. camp in Fort Payne, Alabama. The decision was made to locate the main camp in the urban area of Fort Payne, and not on the mountain, because of the availability of electricity and other utilities and the recreational and shopping opportunities in town. Many of the boys had families living in Fort Payne.

On October 25, 1933, the fort Payne Journal announced that a C.C.C. camp designed to quarter 250 men would be located in Fort Payne at the Athletic Field on the south end of town. The paper said the town could expect the first boys to arrive the next week.²² A small group arrived on November 1 and began preparations for the entire company which arrived on

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ B.J. Moody, "History of Company 472," in Memoirs of District D, Civilian Conservation Corps, 1934 (1983).

²² Fort Payne Journal, October 25, 1933.

November 15.²³ In a long editorial, the Journal welcomed the C.C.C. boys, but pointed out to the town's citizenry that the C.C.C. camp's location on the baseball field left the town without a playing field. But the eventual layout of the C.C.C. camp left the baseball diamond intact, for throughout the 1930's, the fort Payne papers reported baseball scores from games played at the C.C.C. camp field. The Journal gave credit to Alabama Congressman Miles Clayton Allgood for the government's decision to locate the camp in fort Payne. In those depression days, a C.C.C. camp meant much to the local economy. The boys spent money in town and the army purchased local commodities and supplies for the camp from Fort Payne merchants and farmers.

The C.C.C. camp hired local men to supervise the boys in their work. Elbert Hansard was one of the Fort Payne men who was employed as a foreman, and although some of the foremen lived at the camp site, Hansard did not. He was in charge of the mechanics shop, and it was his responsibility to teach a crew of boys to repair the trucks and machines and to keep everything in running order. Woodrow Biddle, one of Hansard's most outstanding students, continued his training in mechanics and later became an instructor at a nearby technical school where he taught for some twenty-eight years.²⁴

The Fort Payne C.C.C. camp had several barracks which slept fifty men each, a few houses for officers and foremen, a long shed for the trucks and equipment, and several outbuildings and shops. The camp operated a commissary and a mess hall. Each day the boys were assigned to a work crew and they traveled by truck to the mountain construction sites. Drivers of the C.C.C. trucks were required to obey all safety regulations and speed limits. On November 29, 1933, the Journal printed a request from C.C.C. camp Captain Lyle A. Brooks that

²³ Ibid., November 1, 1933.

²⁴ Oral interview between James Ray Kuykendall and Elbert Hansard.

he wanted all citizens to report any incident of C.C.C. trucks speeding or any reckless driving. The Journal published periodic reports of the locations of C.C.C. work, warning hunters in the area not to mistake the C.C.C. boys for wild game. For instance, in November the boys were working in Beat 9 NE and SW.²⁵

Many C.C.C. boys dated local girls. Pete Leath recalls that some parents were reluctant for their daughters to go out with the C.C.C. boys, but in time, as the young men conducted themselves with discipline and good manners, these objections were overcome, and many Fort Payne girls dated and some eventually married C.C.C. boys.²⁶ For instance, Claud "Dock" Arbor, who was from the Altoona Community in Etowah County, married Irene McSpadden and made his permanent home in Fort Payne.

Most of the C.C.C. boys at the Fort Payne Camp came from rural and isolated areas where the family's evening recreation consisted of sitting on the front porch rocking and talking. But Fort Payne introduced these to Saturday night boxing matches at the Wilder Building, movies at the Opera House, and later at the DeKalb Theater, baseball games, and First Saturday Trade Days and mule swappings. Sometimes the C.C.C. boys would fight the Fort Payne Legion Athletic Club's attractions--such fighters as War Horse Brock, Battling Bozo, or Kid Moorehead.²⁷ On August 22, 1933, the headline attraction was a fight between Marshall Grosso of Fort Payne and Earl Johnson of Atlanta. For twenty cents the C.C.C. boys could see Jeanette

²⁵ Fort Payne Journal, November 29, 1933.

²⁶ Oral interview between James Ray Kuykendall and Pete Leath.

²⁷ The DeKalb Times, March 14, June 27, 1935; The Fort Payne Times, July 1, 1936.

McDonald in “Naughty Marietta” at the DeKalb Theater or attend a vaudeville production at the Opera House.²⁸ The Fort Payne vs. C.C.C. camp baseball games were free.²⁹

The main construction project for the Fort Payne C.C.C. camp--the DeSoto State Park on top of Lookout Mountain--gradually took shape. The boys constructed roads, cabins, and a large lodge, built camp sites and barbecue pits, cleared hiking trails, planted trees and built small bridges.³⁰

By the winter of 1939, the park neared completion and a date for a spring opening gala was set. The DeKalb Times reported on May 18, 1939, that U.S. Senator Lister Hill had agreed to speak at the opening celebration, which would include speeches by Alabama state director of conservation Dr. Walter B. Jones and DeKalb local officials. George W. Hulme was chairman of the citizens committee which planned the program. Two motorcades were to parade to the park from Fort Payne, all the towns and communities in DeKalb County would participate, and 3,000 people were expected to attend. High school bands would play and the caravan would travel down “the splendid highway” the C.C.C. boys had built.³¹

The newspaper reported that the boys had not only constructed barbecue pits, picnic grounds, cabins, and a lodge, but also a golf course and an airport. The program was to begin at 11:00 A.M., last an hour and a half, and end with a barbecue lunch, served old fashioned southern style, with cold drinks, candies, and ice cream.

²⁸ The DeKalb Times, August 22, 1935.

²⁹ Ibid., August 8, 1935.

³⁰ Jim McGee, “Civilian Conservation Corps, Important in the History of DeKalb County,” Landmark News (1982), p. 11.

³¹ The DeKalb Times, May 18, 1935.

The C.C.C. boys would lead inspection tours so guests could see, “first hand,” the rhododendron and mountain laurel trails and footpaths which the C.C.C. had constructed. The Dawn Patrol, an air group from Chattanooga, planned to fly by in fifteen planes, “complete an aerial circus,” and using the air field, planned to take passengers on rides to view the park from the air. The Chattanooga Times congratulated DeKalb County and members of the Civilian Conservation Corps who “have reason to be proud of DeSoto Park.” The Tennessee paper gave their readers a brief description of the new park’s facilities.³²

The DeKalb Times reported on May 25, 1939, that four thousand people, the largest crowd ever assembled in DeKalb County to that time, came to the opening of DeSoto Park. The Gadsden high School Band played in Union park as the caravan of cars began the procession up the mountain at 10:00 A.M. At the last moment, because of a crucial vote, Senator Lister Hill could not leave Washington, so Fort Payne attorney W. Jay Tindle gave the welcome speech and Dr. Walter B. Jones made the dedicatory address. High school bands from Rome, Gadsden, Fort Payne, and the Alabama Boys Industrial School played.³³

After the park opened and it was turned over to state authorities, the Fort Payne C.C.C. camp continued to operate for a few months, then closed in 1940. The entire C.C.C. program was phased out the following year.

There is general agreement that the C.C.C. program was the most successful and most popular program of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. The C.C.C. provided jobs and incomes to unemployed youths, keeping them off the streets and living in the healthy

³² The Chattanooga Times, May 25, 1939.

³³ The DeKalb Times, May 25, 1935.

environment of the countryside and forests, eating wholesome food, and working while they received free health care, clothing, job training, and recreation. The C.C.C. gave many of the boys lifetime job skills which enabled them to obtain employment in the private sector as the depression conditions eased. Many of the boys participated in the C.C.C. educational programs, and they left the camps knowing how to read, write, and “do figures.” Those young men with a high school education had the opportunity to participate in extension courses for college credits that by local colleges.

For Fort Payne, the C.C.C. camp was an economic asset. The camp provided employment to many and brought additional purchasing power to the community. For DeKalb County and the State of Alabama, the Fort Payne C.C.C. boys had constructed a magnificent park on top of Lookout Mountain, a park which continues to bring people and revenue into DeKalb County and to provide recreational opportunities for all the people of DeKalb.

The C.C.C. reunions, begun by “Dock” Arbor in 1977, provide an opportunity for nostalgic reminiscences about by-gone depression days when the United States dealt with an economic crisis within the framework of American political democracy. The C.C.C. followed a distinctively American pattern. In a certain sense, Americans were repudiating the European ideology of Mussolini and Hitler whose solutions to Italy’s and Germany’s economic distresses were totalitarian and fascist. As the American nation worked to survive a severe depression without destroying its constitutional democracy, the C.C.C. represented the very best of America’s ideals.

