



The Civilian Conservation Corps



CCC crew building the Basin road, mid-1930s

“We can take it!” Out of the ashes of the Great Depression rose an organization that lasted only nine years but left an indelible mark on the landscape of the United States, improving and creating local, state, and national parks. These “Men Who Built the Parks” left a legacy in parks and forests across the country, including Big Bend, and millions of people still enjoy their work today, decades later.

A Troubled Economy

By 1930, many people who had enjoyed the prosperity of the Roaring Twenties found themselves in soup lines and tattered clothes. Sputtering Model Ts rumbled down dusty roads, carrying passengers and their few possessions toward dreams of a better tomorrow.

The growing depression had devastated the nation’s economy and left many in dire straits. By 1933, nearly ten thousand banks had failed and more than 16 million Americans were unemployed.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president by a landslide in 1932 with his promise of a “new deal” for the American people.

Within days of his inauguration, FDR called Congress into special session to work on emergency legislation. An alphabet soup of agencies and programs was created. President Roosevelt kept his promise and the New Deal was born.

Roosevelt’s Tree Army

One of these programs was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), designed to reduce unemployment while also conserving natural resources. The CCC changed the lives of several million people, along with Big Bend National Park. Nicknamed “Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” the CCC was operated through the cooperative efforts of four departments. The Department of Labor oversaw the selection of enrollees, the Army ran the camps, and the Interior and Agriculture departments provided work projects.

Initially, unmarried men between the ages of 18 and 25 and from families on relief could apply. They enlisted for six months, with an option to reenlist for up to two years. The “CCC boys” worked for \$30 a month, \$25 of which was sent to their families. Eventually, “Local Experienced Men” (LEMs) and World War I veterans could enroll. African-Americans and American Indians also participated, generally in segregated CCC companies.

The CCC in Big Bend

If you have driven, hiked, or slept in the Chisos Mountains, you have experienced CCC history. In May, 1933, the Texas legislature established Big Bend State Park. Roads and trails were needed for the new park, and the CCC provided an ideal workforce. A year after the state park was established, 200 young men, 80 percent of whom were Hispanic, arrived to work in the Chisos Mountains.

The CCC’s first job was to set up camp and develop a reliable water supply. The CCC boys faced many challenges, living in tents 85 miles from the nearest town, and facing extreme temperatures and weather. Eventually barracks replaced tents in the area of today’s Chisos Basin Campground.

The Workday

In the early 1930s, the CCC built an all-weather access road into the Chisos Mountains Basin. They surveyed and built the seven-mile road using only picks, shovels, rakes, and a dump truck, which they loaded by hand. They scraped, dug, and blasted 10,000 truck loads of earth and rock and constructed 17 stone culverts, still in use today along the Basin road. After road completion in 1937, the camp was relocated 175 miles north to Balmorhea State Park, where the CCC built the world's largest "spring-fed swimming pool."

A second CCC camp was established in Big Bend in 1940. This group built the Lost Mine Trail, a store, and four stone and adobe cottages still used as lodging today. These CCC boys surveyed the park boundary and established trail and facility locations. Plans to build a large resort hacienda and other facilities in the Basin were abandoned with the onset of World War II. The camp closed in March 1942, signaling the end of an era in Big Bend. Three months later, partially as a result of CCC development, Big Bend was officially established as a national park.

Camp life

If you think Big Bend is isolated today, imagine what it must have been like in the 1930s, before air conditioned comfort and paved roads. Many CCC boys were away from their families for the first time. Because the camps were run by the Army, they had typical barracks and a mess hall. CCC enrollee W.R. Bowers remembered that "they had surprisingly good food. I weighed 145 pounds when I arrived, and 175 pounds when I left!"

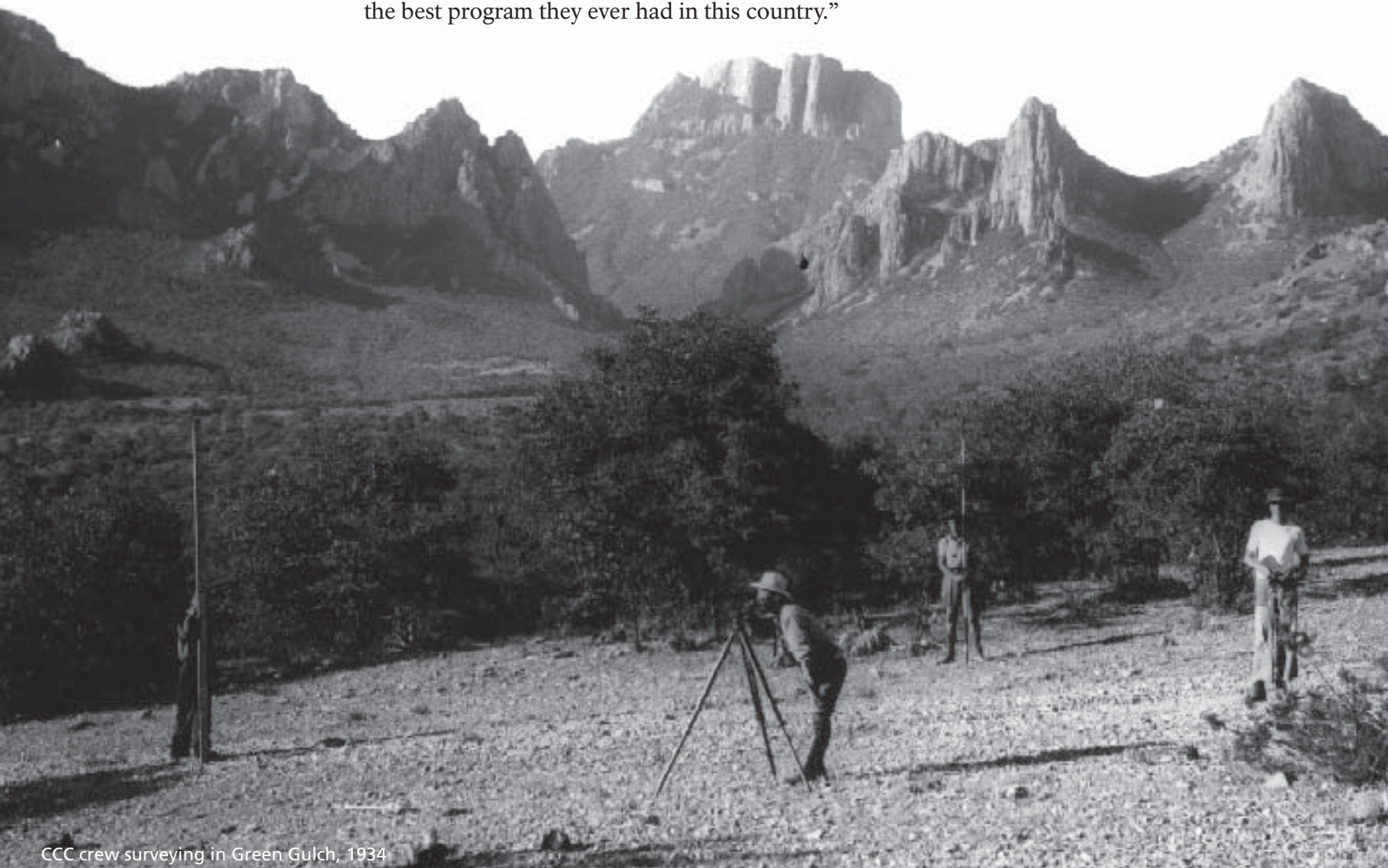
The camp also offered many recreational opportunities. There was a museum, wood-working shop, photo darkroom, and movies were shown twice a month. In 1935, one of the barracks was converted to a classroom and the CCC began to provide education in addition to employment. The camp kept some horses, and some of the men bought their own horses and kept them there.

The Legacy

Nationwide, the CCC operated 4,500 camps in national parks and national forests as well as state and community parks. More than three million men enrolled between 1933 and 1942, planting three billion trees, protecting 20 million acres from soil erosion, and aiding in the establishment of 800 state parks. The CCC advanced natural resource conservation by decades, and provided education, training, and experience for a generation of young men.

Roscoe Weaver, who served in the second CCC camp in the Big Bend from 1940-42, remembered his experience decades later, recalling, "I grew up in there. I went from a kid to a man, where I could hold down a job and really make it on my own.... That was, I think, the best program they ever had in this country."

Since then, millions of visitors to Big Bend have enjoyed the work of the CCCs. During your visit drive to the Chisos Mountains, hike the trails, and remember the young men who worked there many years ago. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote, the Civilian Conservation Corps has "left its monuments in the preservation and purification of the land, the water, the forests, and the young men of America."



CCC crew surveying in Green Gulch, 1934