

# The CCC in Schuyler County

by Gary Emerson

One of the most successful New Deal programs initiated during the Great Depression was the Civilian Conservation Corps, or the CCC. Begun as a means to employ young men ages 18 to 25, the corps did a great deal to conserve and protect the nation's forests and resources, leaving a legacy still visible today.

The young men enrolled in the camps had to be physically fit, unemployed, and unmarried. They received their pay of thirty dollars at the end of each month, and \$25 of it was sent home to their parents. Some of the men earned extra money by charging their fellow camp mates for occasionally taking on their extra duties such as night watch or working in the mess hall.<sup>1</sup> While some of the men in the Schuyler Camps were local residents, most were from cities such as Syracuse, Rochester, Binghamton, and New York City. The city men found work by being introduced to life in the woods. The Schuyler County quota for CCC enrollment in 1938 was limited to fifteen white boys between the ages of 17 and 24. Some local enrollees went to California, Vermont, Alabama, and Oregon to work in CCC camps.<sup>2</sup>

While the men worked to build up the nation's resources, the CCC was building up the men. Mostly coming from poor backgrounds, many of the men were ill nourished, lacked education, and were medically neglected. The camps offered plenty of food, a doctor, medicine, as well as education. On average, the enrollees gained eleven to fifteen pounds within their first few months in the CCC. In their spare time they could attend classes to earn a high school diploma or learn more about soil or forest conservation.<sup>3</sup>

Since the Army was involved in administering the camps, an army-like format prevailed. Each camp housed

around 200 men who woke each day at 6 a.m., lined up for roll call at 6:30, and marched to breakfast at 7. At 7:30 the barracks were inspected to make sure all beds were made properly and to see that wood was at the ready by the stoves. By 8 o'clock the men were taken to their work site where they toiled until 4:30 p.m. Dinner was at 5:30, and lights out at 10 p.m.

The free time enjoyed after dinner allowed the men to get schooling, but also to engage in sports. Baseball was very popular with camp teams playing each other or against local town teams. Boxing matches were also common, as were Field Days, and volleyball.<sup>4</sup>

Dances and other forms of entertainment sometimes brought some fun to the CCC camps. In September 1935, residents of Watkins Glen and Montour Falls organized a dance to honor eighty discharged men from the Whites Hollow Camp near Watkins Glen. A truck was even provided to transport young ladies from Montour Falls to the dance. Another dance at Whites Hollow offered both square and round dancing, with men's admission at 25 cents, while the ladies were admitted free. In 1938, the Whites Hollow Camp also enjoyed a marionette performance of Rip Van Winkle thanks to the Federal Theater Project.<sup>5</sup>

The four Schuyler County CCC camps served various purposes. Camps at Monterey and Van Etten were located on forest lands and did much to improve the forests and prevent forest fires. In the early years, the CCC concentrated on work to conserve natural resources, but later evolved to develop human resources as well, such as lakes, parks, and picnic areas.<sup>6</sup> In 1941 the workers at the Pine Creek Camp in Monterey built the fire tower that still stands in the Sugar Hill Forest. To combat forest fires the CCC workers cleared fire lanes through the woods and dug wells at intervals so that water was available to extinguish forest fires. Half-mile long fire hoses could be attached to the wells when needed. The men also cleared out

brush to improve the health of the forest. Another great service they performed was clearing a path so that electric lines and telephone lines could be run to Monterey and to the camp. Even plowing roads in the winter allowing school buses to make their rounds became part of their job.<sup>7</sup>

When first established in August, 1935, the Monterey camp housed only white men, but in 1937 the white workers were moved out and black workers, mostly from the South, were brought in. The community at first was on edge about having a large group of black strangers brought into their midst, but eventually came to accept the newcomers as they saw that none of the problems they envisioned took shape. Accommodations were made to periodically take the black workers to Elmira for recreation, and the camp also substituted rice on the menu for the potatoes that the black men said they disliked.<sup>8</sup>

The Van Etten camp in Cayuta, the first CCC camp to be established in Schuyler County, did a great deal of forestry work in the Arnot Forest. The men built foot trails, retaining walls, and foot bridges, along with cutting brush and surveying boundaries. The men also laid out roads and trails in the forest. Cornell University owned the land the camp was established on and worked closely with the camp. Cornell professors instructed the young men on forestry topics. The Arnot camp had five barracks, a mess hall, recreation hall, shower building, infirmary, a stable, and a blacksmith shop. A basketball team was established, and it was made known that they would take on any local challengers. When the camp later closed during World War II, it was used to house German POWs for a short time.<sup>9</sup>

The Whites Hollow Camp was built near Watkins Glen and opened on July 6, 1935. Many of the men had been transferred from a CCC camp in Oregon. The day after their arrival a tremendous flood struck Watkins Glen, and the men were instrumental in helping with the clean-up, as well as with taking preventative measures to protect against flooding in the future.

The Whites Hollow camp had a different focus than the Van Etten and Monterey camps. The purpose of Whites Hollow was to work with the state park to develop human resources. Hiking trails, picnic areas, baseball fields, and campgrounds made it possible for people to enjoy nature and the great outdoors. Much work was done to beautify Watkins Glen State Park by building stone steps and walkways. A stone quarry in Montour Falls along Mill Street provided the stone. The men planted shrubs along the park trails, built latrines in the park, and scaled away loose shale on the sides of the glen while sitting in a chair lowered by ropes over the edge of the cliffs. The Punch Bowl Dam and the Whites Hollow Lake dam were also constructed by the CCC workers housed at Whites Hollow.<sup>10</sup>

In 1939, a series of floodlights were installed along the Watkins Glen gorge to light up the spectacular beauty of the geological formation in hopes of drawing in more tourists and their dollars. The Whites Hollow workers carefully placed the poles supporting the lights so that they would be mostly hidden in the foliage and landscape. A grand parade was held to celebrate the lighting of the glen.<sup>11</sup>

The Burdett CCC camp, created in 1939, was the last camp established in the county. It was located on a farm just off from Church Street in Burdett. This camp also had a unique focus. It was administered by the Soil and Conservation Service, and it was established to serve local farmers by instructing them how to prevent soil erosion using terracing, contour strips, water diversion ditches, small check dams to slow water run-off, and by planting trees to help retain water. Seventy-five farmers soon pledged to cooperate with the camp to address soil conservation. The camp was completed by mid-October and was the first camp in the area to use prefabricated lumber to hasten construction. The 200 men housed there were relocated from another camp in Lisle, New York. The finished camp had five barracks, a mess hall, a store house, an educational building, a blacksmith shop, and even a boxing ring.<sup>12</sup>

Only two years after the Burdett camp opened, the nation was at war. The demand for young men for the military spelled the end of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Yet, the legacy of the CCC is still visible in the area today. While the camps were mostly dismantled, the Hidden Valley 4-H Campstill preserves some of the Whites Hollow Camp. The stone work built in Watkins Glen State Park by CCC workers still survives to ease the steps of visitors to the glen. Many trees shading the hillsides in our area were planted by the CCC. The CCC helped young men and their families survive the Great Depression. Some of the men working in Schuyler County married local women, with their descendants still living in the area today. The CCC also paved the way for the rise of the modern conservation and environmental movements, as it taught the young men and the people of the communities it touched, to respect, preserve, and enjoy nature.

### **Endnotes:**

1 Joyce Westervelt, "Civilian Conservation Corps: Schuyler County, New York," Schuyler County Historical Society.

2 "C.C.C. Quota," Watkins Express, September 28, 1938.

3 Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 89-91; 97-98

4 Westervelt, 2.

5 "Farewell Dance at CCC Encampment," Watkins Express, September 25, 1935;

"Dance at CCC Camp," Watkins

Express, April 15, 1936; "CCC to Have Rip Van Winkle Marionette," Watkins Express, July 22, 1938.

6 Ibid, 149.

7 Westervelt, 5-6.

8 Ibid, 4.

9 Ibid, 5; Jan Bridgeford Smith, "Secrets in Plain Site—Camp Van Etten," *Lf* in the Finger Lakes ,

September/October, 2015; "Schuyler CCC Camp Now In Full Swing," Watkins Express, January 24, 1934.

10 Westervelt, 6; "Inside Facts About the Boys in Our CCC Camp," Watkins Express, August 14, 1935.

11 "Floodlights Transform Watkins Glen Into Land Of Rainbow Enchantment,"

Watkins Express, July 12, 1939.

12 Watkins Express, September 6, 1939; September 27, 1939; October 4, 1939; November 1, 1939.