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Adventures:
Life in the
Civilian
Conservation
Corps



Life in the Civilian Conservation Corps

"C.C.C. A Young Man's Opportunity for Work
Play Study & Health"
By Albert Bender, Chicago Federal Art
Project, WPA, ca. 1935
Silkscreen Prints and Photographs Division,
Library of Congress
(B WPA Ill.B46 1)



Pickard: You mentioned the Depression. How did the Depression affect your family?

Hendon: Other than nearly starving to death, I guess...you know, it's strange. Back then nobody had anything, but you didn't lock your doors. Nobody stole anything because they were as bad off as you were. People helped one another. Now, I don't even know the names of the folks next door. They come and go, and depending on how noisy they are, you don't...you know, when I was younger--your age--there wasn't a soul that could intimidate me, but now, with these kids over here in the housing development, if you say the wrong thing to them and you leave, you might come back and be burned out. It's strange.



Pickard: How did the Depression affect your family income?

Hendon: (Chuckle) Well, we were sharecrop farmers, so we never had any income. In 1934, my father borrowed \$50 and made a crop. We had at that time four kids in the family and my mother and my father and made a crop on a sixty-acre leased place.

2

Claude L. Hendon Interview, Oral History Collection University of North Texas Oral History Program



Hendon: Our food...really, if it hadn't been for an old
uncle who was sheriff of Grayson County at the
time...and he'd buy day-old or week-old bread for a
penny a loaf. We lived on what was called Hendon's
Ranch 84, which is now under Lake Texoma, on Big Mineral
Creek. He'd bring that bread out to feed to the hogs.
Well, if it didn't have mold on it, we ate it. We ate a
lot of watermelon. Strangely enough, my father had a
fish trap in Big Mineral, which was illegal. He baited
it with swamp rabbits, and if you got the fish out
before the turtles got in and ate the fish up, you were



doing well. I know good and well the game warden there about knew that my father had the trap in the thing, but he never said anything to him. As a matter of fact, I suspect that my father gave him fish from the fish trap, you see.

But all of that leads me to tell you that there's no more unappetizing sight than a bunch of cornbread crumbs in an old gelled lard from fish from last night's supper whenever you get up in the morning. So, our food was not really...well, we didn't starve to death, but that accounted for--we'll get to that, I'm sure--my going into the Civilian Conservation Corps.



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CCC trucks take UNT conservation students on tour of farms, 1939
Photo Courtesy of University of North Texas, Archives Collection

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Pickard: I think you answered it (chuckle). You brought up a second ago that the problems during the Depression were what led you into the CCC. How did your decision come about? How did you learn about the CCC?

Hendon: Well, I finished high school in the mid-term. I guess I heard about the CCC when we lived in Whitesboro, which was only eighteen miles over to Sherman. When I went in, we made \$30 a month--\$6.00 went to me, and \$24 went to my folks. I don't know how long I had been in, but I assume I only stayed two years because, as well as I can reckon, I went in in the mid-summer of 1939, and I came out in the mid-summer of 1941. If it hadn't been for that \$24 that I sent home to my family, my sister in Saint Louis says sometimes in a nostalgic sort of way that I kept them from starving to death.

Pickard: Were any other members of your family in the CCC?

Hendon: No.

Pickard: You were the only one?

Hendon: You see, when I went in, I was the oldest of the kids. When I went in the summer of 1939, my other brothers were still at home.



Pickard: How did you feel about yourself for the work you did in the CCC?

Hendon: You didn't have any feeling, like I said about the NYA, of being scum or anything. You just felt it was a job that you were doing, and you were just grateful for a job because that was good money for that time, and it aided and abetted the families. It was just a responsibility. That's the thing, and you can't learn it too soon because, as you take it on, all of a sudden you find out that you learn by doing.

Pickard: How did the CCC affect you physically?

Hendon: Oh, it built you up. Whenever you went in, you were a scrawny little bugger, but when you came out....

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“The slogan of the Civilian Conservation Corps is ‘We can take it!’”
National Archives, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps
(35-G-830)



Pickard: What organization or government entity ran the camp?

Hendon: The federal government.

Pickard: Was it the Soil Conservation Service?

Hendon: This was a Soil Conservation camp. You can hear of the CCC as being the "Tree Army." That was when they worked in the mountains and did logging. Actually, they built Lake Murray, which, strangely enough, is just over possibly in Carter County, just over the river there in Oklahoma. It's the most frequented state park in the state of Oklahoma, and it was built by the CCC boys. They had little cabins or huts. Rock was ample there, so they built them, and there's still some of them there.

Pickard: Whenever you entered the camp, could you describe what you would see? Take me on a tour of the buildings, and tell me what was there.

Hendon: I don't remember it having a fence around it. Our buildings were temporary. They were made of wood, and they were little huts. They weren't Quonset huts; they were just little shacks, a little bigger than a chicken house. I think about six of us were in each.

We did our own laundry, we did everything. It taught you independence. You had to make up your own

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"2603 Co. Civilian Conservation Corps Camp Vermilion, Danville, Illinois.
Boxing team. Mr. Taylor, trainer."

National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Civilian Conservation Corps
(35-GC-VI-219-D3) [VENDOR # 69]



bed, and you had to keep your quarters clean. They had regular Saturday morning drill to try to teach a little military discipline, I suppose. If you turned out well on your housekeeping and that, you'd wind up getting to go on liberty. If you didn't, you had to stay and work in the kitchen or whatever. I never did get to do that.

I eventually wound up running the survey crew on a soil conservation project. The camp that we were in was basically interested in sodding waterways to outlets for terraces. When you didn't have that to do, they built fences.



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CCC trucks take UNT conservation students on tour of farms, 1939
Photo Courtesy of University of North Texas, Archives Collection



Pickard: What was your job as an assistant leader like? What duties did you have?

Hendon: Well, I ran the survey party. We ran terrace lines. You'd stake it out first, and then you'd walk the line, and the farmer would come by with his tractor or his team and turning plow and make a line. Then they'd work with that, and then they'd make terraces for him. You'd lay out tanks or diversion terraces if you wanted to keep water off of a field or something, after they found out that you had enough sense to set up a transit and do that sort of thing. We just used a dumpy level. We didn't use a transit, as a matter of fact. We just had a level and a Philadelphia rod.

Somebody had to be in charge. Of course, the superintendent or the man running the program would be around there, but whenever he found out that you had enough sense to do the job, he just let you get on with it. He had to go between you and the farmer, you see, and you had to keep the farmer happy because a lot of them didn't like terraces because it went like that and they were used to going like that [gestures]. The secret of it was that once the government came in and terraced your property, you had to go with the contour of the land. Some of them would rebel, and that would create a problem.

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