

An old idea reborn with equally good results

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DANA MERRYDAY/PHOTO

Crew members put in long days and hard work. They can walk for up to five miles in a single day and carry 30-pound packs with gear and tools.

Today we find ourselves in a remarkably similar situation as our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc., as they struggled in America's Great Depression. While not as severe, the Covid pandemic has put financial pressure on many families and shuttered businesses. In 1933, the new president was promising a "New Deal" for Americans, who were suffering from massive unemployment, 25% on average and much higher for uneducated, poor, and rural

non-farm workers. President Franklin D. Roosevelt rolled out his "Alphabet Soup" of relief efforts, WPA, AAA, FHA, NRA, TVA, and many others.

One of the most successful, benefits-wise, and in having popular public support, was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). As New York governor, Roosevelt had tried a scaled-down outdoor conservation program in his state. So he knew how to go about it on a national scale.

FDR proposed the CCC to Congress on March 21, 1933 and it sailed through in 10 days. The first camp of enrollees was in operation by April 17. The Corps operated with about 300,000 men in six-month hitches. A recruitment poster showed a youth wielding a formidable looking tool with the offer for work, play, study, and health. This hinted at how the program aimed to end many social ills connected to dire poverty.

Enrollees into the CCC usually had eight years or less of education and no job experience. They were often from families on relief, unskilled, and malnourished. The CCC housed (tents at first), clothed, fed, and required the men to send \$25 of their weekly wage of \$30 back home to their family. Besides the hard physical labor of conservation work, carpentry, masonry work and other craft skills – as well as classroom sessions – helped improve the enrollees' skill set and outlook. The idea was to build morale, literacy, and physical fitness into the program's graduates, preparing them to "Whip Old Man Depression."

The program lasted until 1942 when it was disbanded as all men were needed for the war and industry efforts. The military, which had begrudgingly lent officers to lead the CCC camps, now found a boon in CCC graduates who had the skills necessary to lead and pass easily into crucial positions of a rapidly expanding fighting force.



The old CCC Camp at Disston, 1939.

Local impact remains

There still is work standing in Cottage Grove that was done by the large 200-man CCC Camp near Disston. The men built roads, trails, bridges, and a complete modern recreation center. The barracks for housing had electricity, a rec hall and plenty of good grub. A picnic shelter at the Rujuda Campground and the Musick Guard House up in the Bohemian Saddle are two notable CCC projects still preserved in the area.

Roosevelt's CCC program aided over three million men during the nine years it operated. The money earned helped a lot of families back home. Many of the projects they built in parks, National Parks and Forests are not only still standing, but are still being used and enjoyed today. Anytime you see something that is massive, well made, and showing a bit of patina in a park or forest, there is a good chance that it was made by the CCC. In a nutshell the CCC was a resounding success!

This model has been used ever since on a smaller scale in many states, the U.S. Forest Service, Northwest Youth Corps, and Conservation Legacy. All of these programs utilize the crew

system, where the mostly youthful participants learn to work together as they also are learning new skills.

Students now involved

In Cottage Grove, students at Al Kennedy High School have been doing conservation crew work for years under Matt Hall, transition specialist. During the school year the students make weekly trips to the Quamash Prairie performing restoration work and helping with propagating native plants, gardening, and working in an expanding orchard at AKHS. Hall usually operates a crew during the summer that does conservation work with AKHS recruits who receive a stipend.

A couple of moms concerned that there were few summer jobs for youth that were not fast-food centered got the ball rolling for a locally styled youth conservation corps. It helped that one is Amanda Gilbert, executive director of the Coast Fork Willamette Watershed Council (CFWWC), and the other was Krista Farris, formerly of Cottage Grove Ranger District, Forest Service.

Bringing the idea into reality took a lot of networking, planning, grant writing, and patience. CFWWC worked closely with Hall, who is on the board of the watershed council, to make sure the newly emerging CFWWC Youth Crew did not impact his usual summer program.

Now in its fourth season the CFWWC Youth Crew is instilling a modern generation with the same skills and values as the predecessors absorbed in the CCC nearly 90 years before. The real-life training experiences begin before the crew members are even chosen. Prospective Youth Crew must be between 16-19, complete the application, and boil down their qualifications, experiences, skills, and reasons that they want to be a part of the team into a two-page cover letter. Every applicant goes through an interview. Even though the program always gets more applicants than openings, Gilbert makes it clear that every applicant deserves an interview. "It might be the first real employment interview that they have experienced and can be a real growth event." Those who make it to the next round will still need to pass a two-mile loaded pack test to advance to the final selection.

This year the goal is to hire up to 15 crew members, including one youth crew leader who is required to be 21 or older, have a clean driving record, experience in outdoor crew work, wilderness first-aid training and pass a background check. Crew members are paid \$13 an hour and can expect to work hard four days a week. Start time is typically 7 a.m. and work goes to 5 p.m. Like the CCC before, crew members are provided their work and protective

gear. This removes financial obstacles and ensures that crew members' boots, hard hats, gloves, and safety equipment meet the strict requirements for the contract work they are doing for the U.S. Forest Service, The Army Corps of Engineers, and The City of Cottage Grove.

Some examples of the type of work that has been performed by CFWWC crews in the past include: trail clearing and maintenance, piling slash and active fuels, cutting fire breaks, cleaning and doing maintenance of campsites, planting native plants, and improving wildlife habitats.

It is not all sweat and toil; there are a lot of fun learning days too, such as conducting bumble bee surveys, helping save fish during a river diverting habitat improvement project, or snorkeling in Mosby Creek to check on the Pacific Lamprey. Crew members get inspired by mentors, and get pointed toward a career. They all enjoyed meeting and working with the fire crew. One of the first crew members was accepted into the OSU graduate certificate program in Fisheries Management.

Work, fun and team-building

Since it is all hand work, no chain saws or mechanized machinery, the CFWWC can take on high school students. But the work can be physically demanding, clearing blackberries by hand in the heat takes some gumption. Crew members can walk for up to five miles a day and carry 30-pound packs with gear and tools. But there are those days, as previously mentioned, when it is relatively light and fun work, like collecting native plant seeds, measuring trees, and pairing up with experts to learn about the wonders of nature.

Equity, inclusion, and diversity training is a new addition to the fabric of the crew philosophy. Following an initial training, the leadership will try to meet crew members where they are, and help them grow. Team-building exercises, accepting each other, and having to depend on your teammates all helps the crew grow together.

Since the CFWWC is non-partisan, they emphasize how the work benefits everyone. Protecting houses and ranches from fire, creating habitat for those who enjoy hunting, and pointing out it stimulates the local economy. Sometimes the summer paycheck makes a real difference with the crew member's family.

Last year was especially challenging due to Covid. But speaking on behalf of the CFWWC, Reilly Neuman stated they were determined to give kids the opportunity last summer. "We had kids pleading with us to make crew happen."

By using staggered starts, small-member pods and being vigilant about Covid protocols they were able to get quite a bit done. "I had a very frank conversation with our crew members and told them I couldn't promise how much we could do and told them we had to be very flexible as conditions and restrictions changed. Most of the work depended on partners and us having to follow their guidelines. I told them flat out regardless of what they thought about it, all safety guidelines were an absolute! Not wearing a mask could endanger the whole arrangement with the employers of the youth crew," Gilbert said. Transportation was also an issue because the crew members had to drive themselves, which in some cases, job sites located in the woods, led to towing situations when cars got stuck!

The crew did persevere through the pandemic and got a boost when the City of Cottage Grove allowed them to do extensive work in the North Regional park and on other city public work jobs. It was a win-win because the City, due to restrictions, couldn't hire its regular seasonal employees that it normally does in the summer. This year is looking to be more normal but will have to retain the flexibility to change if conditions do.

The money for the program comes from a consortium of partners, which have a great relationship, meeting often and solving the problems that pop up pretty handily. The key players for the CFWWC Youth Crew are the Oregon Community Foundation, the Umpqua National Forest-Cottage Grove Ranger District, Army Corps of Engineers, City of Cottage Grove, the Weyerhaeuser Foundation, and some smaller contributions through civic clubs, and other conservation groups. One big lift is coming this year from the Northwest Youth Corps, who are lending some of their vans to transport crew members. These "Crummies" will be perfect, having the cages to hold the tools, lunches, and supplies, in addition to making it much easier to coordinate travel and rendezvous of crews. South Lane School District has been super supportive in helping recruit kids to apply and participate in interviews during school hours.

Refining the process

At the end of each season there is an important process to help continue to refine the program. The crew members take a survey which they can turn in anonymously if they want. It is more than a gripe session, the goal is to get the honest feedback to improve the program.

Past crews have indicated areas that needed to be changed or refined. As a final activity that is aimed at helping crew members pursue more work in the field, the CFWWC hosts a "Career Night" and teach those on the team 18 and older to navigate the morass of the usa.gov jobs site and give them practice in applying for similar work, which they are now qualified to do. A recent call from the Forest Service came during spring break asking if the CFWWC had any crew available to plant trees. This is normally not an activity they get to do since it is too dry in

the summer. After making some calls they were able to locate six former crew that were available and were able to add a new skill to their lore.

Reflecting over the four years of the youth crew program so far, Gilbert and Newman shared a knowing laugh. "It is not always easy working with teenagers, but we have never had to let anyone go and nobody has quit. It is really very rewarding and it definitely takes a village to make this all happen," they said.