Soil erosion, such as that depicted in this 1935 WPA Indian Program photograph, depleted the soil of its nutrients and decreased fertility. The responsibilities of the Civilian Conservation Corps—Indian Division included the construction of temporary or permanent “soil-saving” and “erosion control” dams, the planting of trees, and the implementation of other “vegetation” techniques to maintain the soil and lessen the susceptibility of topsoil erosion.
Kansans were more prone to dealing with the harsh effects of dust storms than floods during the 1930s, but enrollees of Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) Company 786, an African American company, leaped into action in early June 1935 when a torrential rain pummeled their Fort Riley camp, covering the entire site in four feet of water. “It continued to rain, a continual, dismal downpour that shook the nerve of the hardiest in camp,” an enrollee of the company proclaimed. As the water kept rising, orders came to abandon camp. The men quickly stripped the barracks and fervently loaded their camp trucks, relocating the goods to a more secure location. The task was not easy: “Seizing what they could of personal belongings, the men half-swam, half-waded—swept off their feet many times by the boiling, angry current.” Finally, relief came. “The sun burst through,” a joyful enrollee noted, “forming a brilliant-hued rainbow arching over the eastern horizon as though invoking the ancestral covenant made with Noah.” Despite the traumatic experience, the members of Company 786 were still able to “go about their daily routine with a smile on their lips and a song in their hearts.”

A similar panic and uncertainty about the future entered the minds of Americans with the onset of the Great Depression. Calamity spread throughout the financial sector, but environmental disasters also tested the tenacity of Americans, especially those living in the Great Plains. In the Dust Bowl, caused by drought and human actions, the prevailing winds were sweeping away the region’s topsoil and farmland, wreaking havoc on the landscape and its human inhabitants. In the midst of this catastrophe, the nation overwhelmingly elected Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt as president. Having promised a “New Deal” for the American people, Roosevelt immediately initiated this program upon
entering the White House, countering the effects of the Depression with agencies focused on relief, reform, and recovery. Now referred to as “Alphabet Agencies,” they sought to stabilize the financial and agricultural sectors of the United States while also providing relief to the American public. Arguably the most popular of all work relief programs was the Civilian Conservation Corps.

In operation from 1933 to 1942, the CCC was designed to provide work for unemployed, unmarried men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. Seeking to improve the environment through the conservation and development of natural resources, the CCC placed men in camps run under the direction of the U.S. Army. Workers performed tasks such as planting trees, reversing soil erosion, fighting forest fires, erecting dams, digging wells, and other conservation projects. A man enrolled in the corps was paid thirty dollars a month, with twenty-five dollars sent back home to the enrollee’s family as a relief payment. Each camp typically held two hundred men housed in barracks, with about forty men assigned to each barrack.2

Out of 3,000 nationwide companies, at least one CCC camp was erected in thirty-six Kansas counties from 1933 to 1942. Enrollees stationed at these camps dramatically altered the landscape of the Sunflower State as they constructed dozens of lakes, planted thousands of trees, and reversed soil erosion on acres of inhospitable land. The backgrounds of these enlistees were just as diverse as the projects they undertook. What deserves further inspection, and what has been relatively lost to history, are the contributions and experiences of the African American and Native American enrollees whose strenuous labor helped create the modern landscape of Kansas.3 To fully appreciate the contemporary environment of the Sunflower State, residents must look to the past, when black and American Indian men armed with shovels and pickaxes were working to form the countryside we are accustomed to today. Not only would the Kansas setting be more barren if these particular camps had never been established, but the social history of the state would be less remarkable as well.

The experiences and voices of African American and American Indian CCC enrollees in Kansas have remained relatively unheard since the agency was terminated in 1942, following the onset of World War II. Historian R. Alton Lee, in “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Kansas,” (2005) touched only abruptly on the subject: “‘Coloreds’ [at Fort Riley] were treated unfavorably and there were ‘hints of a cache of stolen CCC property’ in nearby Junction City.”4 Coverage of this topic in historian Peter Fearon’s *Kansas and the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (2007) was also limited, but he did provide pertinent information, such as the location of black camps and discriminatory actions practiced in camps. In one instance, four black enrollees of the Lone Star camp were disciplined for “attending a gambling party.” The men were never informed of their rights and were not typically known for lewd or controversial actions. This type of discriminatory treatment of blacks, Fearon concluded, “was not considered unusual.”5 The foundation for a history of the minority experience in the Kansas CCC was laid by Lee and Fearon, but a prominent void remains. Therefore, a serious examination at the grassroots level of these enrollees and their contributions is both fruitful and well timed.6

2. The definitive history and first serious examination of the Civilian Conservation Corps was undertaken by John Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1942: A New Deal Case Study* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967). Salmond did a masterful job exploring the corps from an administrative and organizational perspective. Relying on copious archival documentation, he described how the CCC was created, how it operated, and how it finally came to an end. Salmond’s case study upheld the notion the CCC was the most popular and successful agency of the New Deal, and he was noticeably sympathetic to the corps and repeatedly detailed the bipartisan praise Americans expressed for the program. For information on the CCC’s role in Kansas, see Peter Fearon, *Kansas in the Great Depression: Work Relief, the Dole, and Rehabilitation* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007). Fearon provided insight into the politics and economics behind the Great Depression in Kansas. Relying heavily on the reports of the Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, Fearon praised Kansas for how the state handled the Depression and distributed relief. The CCC in Kansas was also explored in R. Alton Lee, “The Civilian Conservation Corps in Kansas,” *Journal of the West* 44 (Fall 2005): 69–73. Lee described some of the projects undertaken by Kansas camps as well as some of the “malfeasance” and corruption occurring in the camps.

3. CCC camp newspapers produced by black enrollees stationed in Kansas are a valuable resource. They include *Bugle Call*, *Cappy’s Camp Courier*, *Casual Camp Courier*, *Chatter Box*, *Effingham Territor*, *Lone Star Gazer*, *The Mirror*, and *The Observer*. The Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Records of the National Park Service, and Records of the Soil Conservation Service from the National Archives and Records Administration in Kansas City, Missouri, are also vital.


6. Salmond’s *Civilian Conservation Corps* briefly mentioned the Civilian Conservation Corps–Indian Division (CCC-ID), but it was not until 1971 that the first serious study of Indians in the CCC was published. Donald L. Parman, “The Indian and the Civilian Conservation Corps,” *Pacific Historical Review* 40 (February 1971): 39–56, concluded that because Native Americans faced dire living conditions during the Great Depression, the CCC, arguably, was more important for them than it was for whites. The CCC-ID was also explored in Donald L.
According to the Fifteenth Census of the United States, 2,454 American Indians resided in Kansas in 1930, primarily concentrated on four reservations in Brown, Doniphan, and Jackson Counties. For these members of the Iowa, Sac and Fox, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi tribes, the wrath of the Depression was particularly severe. A government survey conducted in December 1929, inspecting forty-five homes on the Kickapoo reservation of 265 residents, revealed that “as a result of limited incomes there is no variation in the quality of foods; and absence of green vegetables, milk, fruits and other vitamin [sic] providing foods, plus contaminated water supplies and unsanitary housing and living conditions, are responsible for the prevalence of a number of preventable diseases.” The inhabitants of the three other reservations struggled to sustain an adequate standard of living as well. Malnutrition and diseases such as syphilis and other ailments afflicting eyes, stomachs, lungs, and kidneys were rampant. Given such conditions, the importance of the Civilian Conservation Corps–Indian Division (CCC-ID), originally titled the Indian Emergency Conservation Work, cannot be overstated, as the agency provided vital financial assistance in the absence of steady employment. In addition, since enrollees performed projects on the reservations where they resided, the opportunity to improve the physical condition of their own land and homes was available under an optional policy of the CCC-ID.7

Parman, The Navajos and the New Deal (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). As in the argument in his article, Parman contended that Navajos benefited greatly from the CCC, as they were living in the midst of a severe drought. The benefits African Americans gained from the CCC, and the discrimination they faced, can be found in Olen Cole Jr., The African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999). Relying on oral histories, Cole explored black enrollees’ experiences in California CCC camps. He concluded that most enrollees claimed the CCC instilled character, discipline, self-reliance, and confidence in them.

Unlike the standard “white” camps, American Indians enrolled in the Kansas CCC-ID were allowed to live in the comfort (or discomfort, in some cases) of their own homes. Instead of requiring American Indians to live in camps, the CCC-ID was created with the goal in mind of having the enrollees perform conservation projects on or near the reservations where they lived. Lacking official camps, Native American enrollees met each morning at an assigned location and were then transported in CCC trucks to the work site. Whereas most white volunteers were allowed to enter only if they were single and between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, Native Americans were allowed to enlist as married men and between eighteen and sixty years of age. Instead of earning thirty dollars each month, a standard policy in the CCC, American Indian enrollees earned $2.10 each day worked and could not exceed twenty working days, thus allowing a possibility for earning forty-two dollars each month. In addition, CCC-ID administrators in Kansas strove to provide the most full-time work to married men because they had families to support. The administrators also agreed that preference for employment be provided to married men who had larger families to maintain. American Indians were encouraged to “supplement” their corps work with other employment, including making improvements to their homes and farms, which helps to explain why Native American CCC members in Kansas were allowed to reside at their homes. Conversely, non–American Indians enrolled in the corps were forced to abdicate their enlistment when private-sector employment was secured. This was not discouraged, however, and newly employed men were allowed to leave by means of an honorable discharge.

Since Native American enrollees lived at home during their enlistment, the organization of the corps on the reservations differed slightly from that of standard CCC camps. There was only one superintendent, H. E. Bruce, and one principal foreman, P. Everett Sperry, for the reservations in Kansas. Each reservation was also assigned a “leader,” who was paid sixty dollars per month. A meaningful relationship between the CCC-ID leaders and the tribal council on the reservations existed as well. The tribal council had influence in the decision-making process of projects and enrollment, thereby preserving tribal autonomy.

The administrators of the CCC-ID in Kansas, such as principal foreman P. Everett Sperry, went to great lengths to promote the agency’s goals to intrigued residents and potential enrollees. “CCC-ID should mean much to the individual and his family. . . . CCC-ID is not a football to be kicked around for the fun of it, but rather it is an institution basically sound in principle and purpose if we but use it that way and for that purpose,” Sperry noted in an attempt to convince enrollees to take full advantage of their time in the corps. Sperry further emphasized that the program was not an institution fit for every man: “The law in no way obligates CCC-ID to take every man on the job who asks for work or who may happen to have a large family. It is our intention, however, to take just as many men as our funds will permit, providing each man does his part in the performance of USEFUL WORK.” Again, Sperry was proclaiming that the CCC-ID was not a guaranteed safety net for residents on the reservations; local Indians needed to demonstrate an eagerness to excel in the corps because, as Sperry believed, “there isn’t an Indian living that is entitled to work on CCC-ID unless he is worthy.”

Most applicants who were rejected by the CCC-ID were turned down because of health defects. According to one physical examination of sixty-eight applicants from the Kickapoo tribe, twelve were rejected due to heart defects.
murmurs, infected teeth, impaired vision, amputated legs, hernias, and “arteric sclerosis.” During another examination, out of 175 applicants from the Potawatomi reservation, forty-three were rejected because of ailments ranging from hemorrhoids to tuberculosis to syphilis and gonorrhea.¹³

Sperry attempted to convince Kansas taxpayers the CCC-ID would have a lasting and positive impact on the landscape. “When a taxpayer works for his money, he always likes to know that it is being used wisely and efficiently,” Sperry stated. “Believing firmly in this as a typical Kansas tradition...I here set forth some of the things that I feel Kansas people would like to know about the Indians living in this state.” First, he tried to dismiss the assumption that Native Americans were antiquated: “You would be surprised to know how many people believe that the Indians are still living in bark huts or wigwams and dress in buckskin and feathers.” Sperry admonished persons who still held on to this anachronistic impression: “They do not wear feathers and paint as an every day dress but rather don their overalls and aprons and go about their work as their good neighbors do.” Second, perhaps seeking to provide justification to the agency, Sperry compared the CCC-ID favorably to the white camps: “If the reader can draw upon his imagination a little and think in terms of what the white CCC is doing—then he will have a pretty good picture of what is being done on the reservation, except that the Indians probably are doing just a little more work, probably better work due to the fact that he is at home and working on lands in which he has either direct or indirect interest.” As a final point, Sperry took into account how many Kansas residents possibly perceived the CCC-ID as a “dole”

¹³. “Results of Physical Examination of Applicants for Emergency Conservation Work,” n.d., box 183, series 71, folder 54, CCC-ID Correspondence, 1935-1942, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA.
system—something both Americans generally and President Roosevelt tried to avoid. “The Indians work for what they got and I can say from personal knowledge that our Indians are good workers,” Sperry assured his readers.

Foreman Sperry could prove convincing in his words, but what could validate the existence of the CCC-ID were the physical projects that American Indian enrollees accomplished in Kansas. It must be remembered that in the 1930s the region was facing not only economic disaster but also an environmental catastrophe. A combination of drought, extreme temperatures, and inefficient farming practices had created an ecological threat that challenged the will of all Kansans. In fact, by 1934 the entire state was designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as an “emergency drought area.” These cataclysmic events inspired many of the projects of the CCC-ID. Blueprints were designed for the reservations specifically to reverse the soil erosion torturing the land. Since the inception of the CCC-ID in April 1933 to June 30, 1937, on the Potawatomi reservation thirty-one temporary or permanent “soil-saving” and “erosion control” dams were constructed, thirty-one wells developed, four miles of telephone line erected, and other conservation projects completed for a total of 30,515 man-days at a cost of $96,158.10. Another $83,468.30 and 29,300 man-days were spent clearing debris from roadsides, wiping out rodents, establishing flood controls, building fences, and other projects.

Projects undertaken to reverse soil erosion by the CCC-ID in Kansas included the planting of trees—among them shelterbelts containing hundreds of trees—and other “vegetation” techniques to maintain the soil and lessen the susceptibility of topsoil erosion. In some cases, thousands of trees were planted in one month. Six hundred catalpa, 600 hackberry, 600 coffee, 1,500 Chinese elm, 600 cottonwood, 1,050 mulberry, 700 Osage orange, 450 Ponderosa pine, 450 American plum, and 450 green ash trees were planted in April 1939 alone by Kansas CCC-ID members. Along with the implementation of contour farming, terraces were forged to revive the soil, increase crop yields, and prevent future erosion. Many times these terraces and contours were developed on the men’s own land.

Not all of the projects were deemed major success stories. The associate forester of the CCC-ID, A. W. Mollison, stressed that some of the shelterbelts developed by the enrollees were in wretched condition. “Last year,” Mollison indicated, “some of the Shelterbelt plantings suffered losses and severe setbacks due to the lack of adequate cultivation . . . [and] because an extensive planting program was undertaken without giving consideration to the need for funds and equipment necessary for the maintenance of plantings.” Mollison was insinuating that a portion of the planting had been performed haphazardly and without proper planning.
but he remained optimistic that the condition of the trees could improve with persistence: “With your help the trees will come out ahead.”

Many CCC-ID projects involved improving the living conditions on the reservations. As mentioned earlier, a common deficiency on the reservations was lack of suitable nourishment. One project promoted by the superintendent of the Potawatomi Indian Agency, H. E. Bruce, was intended to alleviate this problem. As Bruce asserted, “Nothing is quite so important right now as gardens!” Bruce believed that a “good deal” of the food supply for American Indians could be created simply by growing gardens as long as the drought was not harsh. He also believed that by growing gardens, American Indians could save money by avoiding expensive foods packaged in “tin cans and paper sacks.” Nevertheless, most of the projects were geared toward conservation efforts. The enrollees in Jackson and Brown Counties constructed at least fourteen artificial lakes ranging in size from one to five acres. Sperry even contacted the state fish and game warden in hopes of stocking the lakes with bluegill, crappie, channel cat, bullhead, and bass. Rodent-control measures were also taken to protect the land from destruction. Grasshoppers in particular were a significant nuisance, along with rabbits, which were prone to destroy the enrollees’ shelterbelts. The enrollees resorted to killing many of the creatures by poison, but action was taken to repel the animals by spreading a mixture of lime, water, and linseed oil on the trunks of the trees. “This is not a 100% cure but it looks like we are at least discouraging the bunnies for the present,” Sperry reasoned.

Some projects turned into archaeological digs for Native American enrollees. For example, on the Iowa reservation near White Cloud in mid-September 1938, the machinery being used to construct a road uncovered “what appeared to be the remains of an old Indian village.” The enrollees dug out their pocketknives and slowly excavated the sides of the grader ditch and back slope. Their findings were certainly extraordinary, as “quantities of ash” were uncovered, believed to have come from a spot where the village cooking was performed. “In the ashes along the edge,” an enrollee explained, “we found squirrel bones, large fish bones, portions of coon, and many pieces of old pottery.” This finding led Sperry to contact the Department of Anthropology at the University of Kansas. He knew that three years before, the University of Nebraska had conducted its own dig around the area and found several interesting items. Sperry thought the items uncovered by the enlistees would “prove equally interesting” since he had unearthed pottery the day before.

18. Memorandum to Superintendents from A. W. Mollision, January 13, 1940, box 190, series 73, folder “Tree Planting 1939 Program,” CCC-ID Project Files, 1938-1941, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA.

19. H. E. Bruce, “With Gardens It Is Better Late Than Never,” Conservation News and Views, April 1937; letter from H. E. Bruce to Kansas State Fish and Game Warden, February 28, 1935, box 7, series 7, Subject Correspondence, 1883-1940, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA.


21. “Relics,” Conservation News and Views, September 1938; letter from P. Everett Sperry to University of Kansas Department of Anthropology, September 12, 1936, box 8, series 7, Subject Correspondence, 1883-1940, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA. According to the Mary Adair, the senior curator at the University of Kansas Biodiversity
Notable problems arose during the CCC-ID’s tenure in Kansas. The abuse of alcohol among enrollees was a constant menace for camp administrators. “Liquor breaks up homes,” Superintendent Bruce preached, “causes accidents, fights, wife-beatings and unhappiness. . . . We should be sober—we should be clean morally—we should be good citizens.” Suspensions were dispersed regularly to men who were found drunk, which was the official policy of the CCC-ID on all four reservations. As of August 27, 1935, thirteen men had been suspended on the Potawatomi reservation with two indefinite suspensions, as it was those enrollees’ third offense. Additionally, seventeen were suspended on the Kickapoo reservation, and five on the Iowa and Sac and Fox reservations. On another occasion, two workers were suspended for drinking and crashing their car into a parked truck along the street. Another was suspended even though he was drinking off the job and was not working on a CCC-ID project. He did, however, assault his wife while intoxicated—reason enough for Superintendent Bruce to suspend the man indefinitely from the agency.22

Sperry did not take the insubordination involving liquor lying down. He sought to solve the nuisance by confronting the source of the problem: bootlegging. In one instance, the enrollees were obtaining liquor from a man named Shreyer from the Kickapoo reservation. Coincidentally, from Sperry’s depiction of the account to Bruce, Sperry found Shreyer at a local restaurant in Mayetta called Beams. After walking into the restaurant, Sperry confronted Shreyer and the man with him, Mose Williams. Sperry asked Williams, while staring directly at Shreyer, if he was “traveling with good company.” “You would have enjoyed the boom it made,” Sperry boasted to Bruce. The sarcastic statement to Williams seemed to “touch off” Shreyer, who warned Sperry that he had “dropped down at the wrong place.” Shreyer denied any wrongdoing but claimed he could tell Sperry where several bootleggers actually lived, only if Sperry was willing to spend fifty to one hundred dollars a “crack.” Sperry was not in the mood to negotiate with the man and left shortly thereafter.24

Although there were significant problems on the reservations involving liquor, venereal diseases, and reckless driving, enrollees could take advantage of educational opportunities offered by the CCC-ID. American Indians on the reservations, including the enrollees and all other adults, were able to participate in the Enrollee Program, which provided both academic education and job training. Participants in the Enrollee Program were taught an assortment of subjects. In some classes, attendees received lessons concerning syphilis, including what it was and why it was harmful. During other lessons, participants were taught how to prepare a proper garden and a seed bed and how to maintain “Good Citizenship.” On other occasions, students listened to lectures on the planting of small grain, profitable pig production, practical mathematics, home sanitation, poultry feeding, law and order, farm management, and bookkeeping. The goal of the Enrollee Program was to provide skills to enrollees and members of the reservations that would last beyond the existence of the CCC-ID.25

The CCC-ID program ended in 1942, along with the CCC itself, but the enrollees’ work in Kansas was lasting. The CCC-ID left such an imprint on one project manager, Tom H. Tribbey, that he felt compelled to write a letter to the future. He addressed the letter to the “people of Horton, Kansas 2042 A.D.” and kept his message simple. He plainly outlined the major accomplishments of the 297 enrollees of the Potawatomi reservation: 410 acres of shelterbelt trees planted, 13,541 temporary dams built, and 236.9 miles of terraces constructed. The writer left no final uplifting message that would incite nostalgia, but his purpose was clear. The CCC-ID’s presence in Kansas had left a permanent footprint that residents of Kansas today can still find, and perhaps those living in the state in 2042 will still be able to do so.26

24. Letter from P. Everett Sperry to H. E. Bruce, December 19, 1935, Box 7, Series 7 Subject Correspondence, 1883–1940, box 179, series 71, folder 17.23, CCC-ID Correspondence, 1935-1942, RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, NARA.
In addition to the American Indians who found meaningful employment in Kansas and elsewhere with the CCC during its nine-year history, approximately 200,000 African Americans went through the doors of the agency. The CCC was originally established as an integrated program, as indicated in a clause of the Emergency Conservation Work Act that prohibited discrimination due to “race, color, or creed.” Due to the existence of Jim Crow laws—legally sanctioning segregation—however, the CCC ultimately operated as a segregated institution. In his 1967 case study of the CCC, John Salmond argued the Tennessee native and CCC director (1933–1939) Robert Fechner was largely responsible for the practice of segregation in the corps. Fechner’s September 10, 1934, order disregarded the recommendation of the U.S. Army, which assisted in the placement of enrollees, to maintain integration and forced several integrated companies to separate along racial lines.27

Even before they were enrolled in the corps, many black men were intentionally excluded during the selection process. Selection agents working for the Department of Labor and responsible for recruiting and enlisting men for the corps often denied African Americans an opportunity to enroll.28 The War Department, which

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was in charge of several pertinent aspects of the corps, including day-to-day activities in camps, has also been criticized for discriminating against African Americans. The department, historian Charles Johnson explained, opposed implementing black reserve officers in the CCC and attempted to curtail the establishment of black camps. The policy of the War Department was “clearly discrimination based on race, however camouflaged by appeals to decentralization, local pressures, greater wisdom, or lack of applicants,” Johnson concluded. Another historian, Calvin W. Gower, pointed out that only a few “token” black men were able to achieve prominent standing in the corps. And, despite the push by Edgar G. Brown, the self-proclaimed “CCC Adviser on Negro Affairs,” most African Americans were unable to achieve “significant improvements” to their lives through the CCC or the New Deal more broadly. Despite the arguments expressed by Johnson and Gower, because of the military’s heavy involvement in the CCC, the likelihood of the corps fully operating as a desegregated program while the military remained segregated was improbable. The CCC was a reflection of the institution that regulated it.

Olen Cole Jr., author of The African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps, whose study focused on California, argued that incessant hostility was incited by some locals once they learned black CCC camps were to be constructed near their towns. Whereas many communities protested because they feared the number of cases of public intoxication would rise, other towns were apprehensive because they unreasonably imagined the towns’ white women and children would be placed in harm’s way. Robert Fechner reacted to some of these complaints by eliminating black CCC camps or moving them to other, less controversial, locations. It is unclear what degree of resistance, if any, black camps in Kansas faced, but evidence does exist showing support for enrollees from locals. In May 1935 Camp Lyon, near Reading, hosted a baseball game, where one enrollee revealed, “The attendance at the first home baseball game of the season was increased to a large degree by the presence of many young sporting enthusiasts from Emporia and the surrounding localities. Included in this throng were many of the social elite. . . . A large number of the folk visited the project and many of them enjoyed a short program in the recreation hall on the camp before returning to their homes.”

Despite setbacks encountered by some blacks across the nation prior to their enrollment in the corps and the discrimination they experienced once in camp, many African Americans in Kansas saw the CCC as a panacea for their problems. Roy E. Johnston, a member of Company 4717 near Fort Leavenworth, emphasized his gratitude for the agency: “Today, after one year’s duty with the company, I want to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed our first year together. We’ve had our ups and downs, our daily problems, and our disappointments, but they are far overshadowed by the joy and satisfaction of working together for the good of all.” To focus solely on the negative aspects of the CCC diminishes the numerous advantages the corps offered to African Americans. The corps provided black enrollees in Kansas and across the nation temporary asylum from the harshness of life during the Great Depression.

The situation for African Americans living in Kansas mirrored the conditions many Americans were experiencing during the 1930s. Out of a total population of 1,880,999 in 1930, 3.5 percent, or 66,344, were African American. A majority of the black population lived in urban settings, but 15,063 blacks were settled in rural areas. The number of blacks receiving relief in Kansas confirmed that the Depression was more detrimental to their population than to the white population. In 1935, 3,737,000 African Americans across the nation were receiving relief, representing 30 percent of the black population in the United States. The figures in Kansas were even more discouraging. According to a 1934 study, out of 66,360 blacks living in Kansas, nearly 39 percent, or 25,536, were on relief. Conversely, the total number of persons on relief in Kansas was 248,112, or around 13 percent. While 17 percent of blacks on relief received direct payment assistance, approximately 83 percent of black relief cases relied on work relief or government program jobs, such as public works, education, and similar programs. The absorption of African American enrollees into these programs was unique in many ways, and the experience contributed to their overall sense of pride and accomplishment.

30. Cole clearly outlined the opposition black CCC camps endured from local communities, but it should be noted that white camps occasionally received resistance from communities as well. Cole, African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps, 55–56. Salmon, Civilian Conservation Corps, 100–01.
33. Cole, African American Experience in the Civilian Conservation Corps, 68.
as street and sewer repair, landscaping, and water-well construction. In several Kansas counties—including Allen, Cherokee, Crawford, Edwards, Graham, Kearny, Marshall, Morton, Nemaha, Potawatomie, Stevens, Wallace, Waubansee, and Wyandotte—more than 50 percent of blacks were on relief. By September 1934, 71.4 percent of African Americans living in Graham County, home to the famous settlement of Nicodemus, were receiving relief, and by December 1934 this percentage had increased to 90.9 percent, or 298 blacks. Conditions had not improved for the black population in Kansas by 1935; the number of African Americans on relief rose to 27,264, an increase of nearly 2,000 since 1934.

These desperate conditions help explain why enrolling in the CCC was more than just a search for adventure for some African Americans—for many it was a choice that meant surviving the hardship of the Depression. Altogether, Kansas benefited from at least four black CCC companies that eventually occupied seven different campsites across the state. In addition, one black company comprised of World War I veterans was stationed at Marion and later transferred to Meade. By 1934, only one year after the CCC was established, 147 blacks from Kansas, out of 4,118 Kansans who enrolled in 1934, were enlisted in the corps. This figure nearly quadrupled in 1935, when 522 blacks from Kansas enlisted during the January, April, June, and October calls.

Although the initial months were important for enrollees to adjust to life in the CCC and enhance the conditions of their new homes, perhaps the relationships they formed with local residents were just as important. The camp newspapers produced by white enrollees emphasized the importance of courtesy, good behavior, and neat appearance in the camp; camp newspapers produced by black enrollees instructed the men about how to behave in the community as well as in the camp. As previously mentioned, many black camps in the CCC faced animosity from prejudiced communities, which sometimes led to the abolishment or relocation of camps. Thus, establishing a rapport with locals was pertinent.

The importance of initiating cordial relations was routinely stressed to black enrollees stationed in Kansas. The members of Company 786—the same men who battled the flood in June 1935—were told once they moved to Wellington, “The feeling between the camp and nearby communities can and should be at all times of the finest order. A good relationship can be maintained when and only when each member conducts himself as a gentleman at all times. Communities are quick and sometimes harsh in their judgment.” The men were even given a list of behaviors to emulate when visiting nearby towns. These included avoiding “congesting the sidewalks” and abstaining from “loud and improper language.” Lastly, the men were instructed to “be honest and straightforward in your dealings with merchants and dealers.” Perhaps the enrollees followed these rules because it appears that the citizens of Wellington were quite welcoming to their new neighbors. As one enrollee described, “We have had the privilege of swimming in the swimming pool in town and have had a very nice time with all of the people that we have met in your City.” The company commander of 786 also noticed the special relationship between the camp and the community members. “I wish to greet the citizens,” the commander wrote, “of Sumner County and the City of Wellington, who have by their graciousness and kindness helped make Camp Lake Wellington a pleasant place to live. The association between camp and countryside has been most cordial; may it continue so.”


35. Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, Public Welfare Service in Kansas, 1934: KERC Bulletin 289 (November 1, 1935): 755–56. These numbers do not reflect the total number of blacks stationed in Kansas camps; they only confirm the number of blacks originally living in Kansas before they enrolled. Many African Americans who were stationed in Kansas also hailed from Missouri, such as Company 1728, which was transferred to Lone Star after being organized at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that all blacks from Kansas in the CCC were actually stationed in Kansas camps. Just as African Americans from Missouri were stationed in Kansas, so were many black Kansans relocated to Missouri, Minnesota, and other states. Out of the 522 blacks enrolled in 1935, most came from only a few counties: 162 from Wyandotte County, 33 from Shawnee County, 36 from Leavenworth County, 56 from Montgomery County, and 30 from Sedgwick County. For more information, see Kansas Emergency Relief Committee, Public Welfare Service in Kansas, 1935: KERC Bulletin 355 (July 1, 1936): 291.

36. Articles pertaining to how white enrollees should behave in camps include “The Commander’s Corner,” By a Dam Site, May 9, 1935, and “Visitors,” By a Dam Site, May 16, 1935.

37. “Relations to the Community,” Chatter Box, August 30, 1938; “Relations to the Community,” Chatter Box, September 26, 1938; “To the City of Wellington,” Chatter Box, August 30, 1938; F. J. Redding, “By the Company Commander,” Observer, December 4, 1939.

A Place for All 27
Although the locals were hospitable to black enrollees of Wellington, some bias against the enrollees did originate with CCC personnel within the camp. Camp physician Charles Homer Dewey, a white man, claimed:

A Negro Company, surely puts gray hairs in the head of a Company Commander, for in general, the Negro is not easily controlled, or disciplined. Many of them, are nothing, and desire to continue in the same state. Most of them have a sort of underdog complex, with a firm conviction, that all the Whites are their enemies. . . . Many of the Negroes, are sullen, resentful and a large part of the race is ungrateful. . . . And how noisy they are. It seems that they get the most enjoyment out of grouping up, and every one talking at once, in a voice so loud, that no one can possibly hear what the other says.38

Despite his bias, Dewey appears to have been cooperative with the enrollees and never had adverse relations with them. It is unclear whether the enrollees perceived their relationship with Dewey in the same light.

The CCC men of Wellington were not the only enrollees in Kansas who were instructed in how to behave. The enrollees of the Lone Star camp were also told not to act like “clowns” and not to “laugh or talk out loud” while attending movies. The men were plainly told if they were going to act like “wild jackasses” then they should move to some “remote corner and stay there because really, men, no one wants to be bothered with you.” The enrollees stationed near Fort Leavenworth were advised to maintain an appropriate appearance: “You should be careful to be presentable at all times . . . try to be clean and neatly dressed.”39

One of the best ways black camps could foster relations with Kansas communities involved the conservation projects they performed. Like workers in other camps in Kansas, black volunteers worked on a variety of projects that transformed the Kansas soil and land. The Lone Star camp in 1937 began work on an earth-fill dam “for the purpose of water conservation.” “The work on the camp project,” an African American enrollee wrote, “is of extreme importance as this section of the country is noted for having a very small comparative rainfall.” This project was labor-intensive for the enrollees, but they saw the work as an opportunity to improve the land and benefit themselves. The men believed the project provided them with a livelihood and an opportunity to learn an occupation they could pursue after their stay in the corps. They even believed constructing the lake helped them build “good citizenship.”40

African American enrollees also constructed Lyon County State Lake—a recreational area many Kansans still enjoy. The men finished the lake and park project in 1935 and could boast that the lake had a surface area of 135 acres with a maximum depth of 43 feet. They also developed the 582 acres of park that accompany the lake. Shortly after the completion of the lake, Company 767 was transferred to Lone Star in Douglas County, where it commenced construction on another lake. The surface area of the Lone Star Lake was to be larger than that of the Lyon County state lake by sixty-one acres.41

Enrollees of Company 786, located near Wellington, also undertook traditional conservation projects such as terracing and tree planting. In December 1939 the camp received 55,000 small trees from the Soil Conservation Service Nursery in Manhattan. Since it was the middle of winter, the trees could not be planted immediately; thus, the enrollees had to tend to them until they were ready to be planted on the farms of Sumner County Soil Conservation Association members the following spring. The variety of trees to be planted was astounding. The different species included western catalpa, hackberry, Russian olive, green ash, Osage orange, mulberry, black locust, black cherry, Chinese elm, dogwood, honeysuckle, wild plum, apricot, sand cherry, chokecherry, lilac, and tamarisk. Company 4717 of Fort Leavenworth was also involved in a number of tree-planting projects. In approximately one year’s time, the company planted over 7,000 trees. The company also completed projects including fence, dam, and road construction; forest stand improvement; insect control; fire-hazard reduction; and pond and lake development, to name just a few.42 The amount of work that African

American CCC camps in Kansas undertook is noteworthy, and the projects still standing are a lasting testament to their presence.

There were special occasions in camps sometimes when the men were not asked to labor at a work site. Holidays in the black camps were certainly exciting events for the enrollees, since many times the men were granted leave, allowing them to temporarily return home to visit their families. Many men stayed in camp, though, to partake in the festivities. Thanksgiving and Christmas were grandly celebrated, but unique to African American camps were the annual Emancipation Day celebrations in celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation, and also on George Washington’s, Abraham Lincoln’s, and Frederick Douglass’s birthdays, enrollees of the black camps in Kansas would stage elaborate processions to celebrate and honor their history. Drawings of Washington, Lincoln, and Douglass regularly grace the front pages of camp newspapers.

Inside the newspapers, enrollees or educational advisers contributed biographies of the three men or reprinted the text of the Emancipation Proclamation. The goal of these actions was not only to celebrate the freedom of African Americans but also to educate.43

Emancipation Day celebrations were thrilling for enrollees and for the local townspeople joining in with the festivities. Company 767 of Reading, for instance, held on September 22, 1935, a celebration to commemorate the “72nd year of liberation from bondage.” The day’s events were numerous: breakfast, lunch, and dinner; baseball and softball games; and a dance held in the evening. Not all enrollees celebrated Emancipation Day on the camp site, though. “Three truck-loads” of Company 786 members were brought to the community park in Wellington on September 22, 1938, to observe the celebration sponsored by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The celebration included softball games, but speeches were also delivered and games were provided for the “kiddies.”44

Other avenues were available for black enrollees in Kansas camps to display their heritage. In the spring of 1935, Company 786 conducted a vote to determine the name of its camp. Camp Booker T. Washington, Camp Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Camp Crispus Attucks were all potential names. To the dismay of at least one enrollee, the men of the company chose “Woodpecker” as the camp nickname. “‘Woodpecker’ isn’t an appropriate name for our camp,” said the enrollee. “The members of this camp,”


he continued, “who do not know much about their people should read several of the books on the Negro that are available in the library. An old African proverb is ‘It is bad not to know, but to wish not to know is worse.’” Six months later, perhaps in response to this passionate plea, the men of the camp decorated their recreation hall to make it more “beautiful” and “home-like,” as well as to honor their race. Portraits of prominent black leaders and other influential persons such as Paul Laurence Dunbar “the poet,” Frederick Douglass “the abolitionist,” Booker T. Washington “the educator,” and Abraham Lincoln “the emancipator” were hung on the walls of the building. The enrollees of the black camps were infatuated with future boxing legend Joe Louis. He too adorned many camp newspaper front pages and received extensive coverage for his boxing matches.

The pride enrollees felt in their history, black athletes, and distinguished historical black and white leaders transferred to another camp program: the CCC educational system. Howard W. Oxley, the director of CCC camp education, concluded that the CCC provided an “invaluable” service to black workers in regards to education. In the CCC, Oxley explained, African Americans were taught not only vocational skills that would benefit them once they left the corps but also information that would make them better citizens. Additionally, African Americans with prior teaching or business experience were able to become educational advisors in the camps.

Enrollees were enthused about the educational program during their stay. “The Educational Program,” one participant, Irvin Penn, attested, “has been of great value to me. It has offered me the splendid opportunity of broadening my general outlook on life and helping me advance my educational studies.” Another enrollee stressed the importance of education in the CCC: “The CCC is not merely an agency of employment. Its plans reach far above the scope of providing a means of livelihood. . . . Let every man vow to learn something worthwhile during his stay in this company. Opportunity is at your door. Enter my friend, lest the door be barred.”

Most of the men took this advice and did enter the educational “door” during their stay in the corps. Every member of Company 767 was enrolled in at least one class. In November 1937 90 percent of the volunteers of Company 786 were enrolled in at least one class as well. The variety of classes helps shed light on why attendance rates were high. Penmanship, Spanish, public speaking, poetry, carpentry, first aid, and auto mechanics were only a few of the classes offered to enrollees in most of the camps. Members of Company 1728 could even attend a “table waiting” class—a marker symbolizing the social standing of African Americans during the time period. The purpose of the class was to teach the men “a trade that will furnish them a lifetime job. They will be given all the necessary instruction in table waiting, and personal service.”

The “Negro” history classes offered in the African American camps appear to have been the most popular among the men. One enrollee who attended the class

45. “Vote Again,” Chatter Box, May 1935.
49. “Classes Show Increased Enrollment,” Lone Star Gazer, May 1, 1936; “Ninety Percent of Boys Participate in Education Program,” Chatter Box, November 30, 1937.
in the Fort Riley camp provided evidence for why the class was so appealing: “You should hear some of these hot discussions in the Negro History class—and believe me they do get hot.” The textbook typically used in this course was written by Carter G. Woodson, who, along with the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, had established Negro History Week in 1926 and helped pioneer the establishment of black history courses in schools. Along with Emancipation Day celebrations and the admiration given to black figures and Abraham Lincoln, the history courses offered in black camps demonstrate how black enrollees in Kansas celebrated their culture and remained distinct from the all-white camps.51

African American men stationed in Kansas embraced life in the corps. “Ya know folks,” one enrollee exclaimed, “camp life is not so bad! Wholesome food, good fresh air, sanitary conditions, body building work and exercises, good companionship, healthy games, et cetera. It can’t be beat; plus, of course, the remuneration at the end of the month! What a life! What a life!” The men also remained optimistic that the benefits of the program would be enduring. Albert Robinson of Company 786 spoke highly of his stay in Kansas: “So take from an enrollee, who has been here in the CCC Camp . . . I know now that when I have gone from this camp, I will be able to finish any task that I once begin because of the things I have been taught and experienced here.” Not only were the men taught skills that could assist them outside the corps in finding a job, but their experience in the corps instilled in them confidence and pride for their race and heritage.52

Never a permanent agency, the CCC breathed its last breath in June 1942 when Congress eliminated all funding for the corps. The organization’s decline, however, began two years earlier with the Selective Service Act, which drew those men eligible for work in the CCC into the military. In early 1941 forty-three CCC-ID enrollees from all four American Indian reservations in Kansas enlisted in the National Guard. Twelve former CCC-ID enrollees were working for the Milwaukee Road Railroad in Illinois by July 1941.54

There were always rumors swirling during the decade of the 1930s that the CCC would transform into a permanent agency. The idea of taking youth off the street to perform conservation measures designed to improve the environment appealed to many. This dream never came to fruition. Kansans, whose wish for corps permanency was never realized, need not look far for the lasting legacy of the CCC. It is at the back doors of many of their homes in the rolling contours of fields protected from soil erosion. Sparkling lakes, such as Meade Lake and Marion County Lake, constructed by CCC crews made up of African American members, have provided countless hours of boating, swimming, and fishing. Finally, the thousands of trees still standing tall are reminders that for nine short years, thousands of men of all backgrounds and ethnicities—from American Indians in the northeast corner of the state to the southwest corner, where hundreds of African American enrollees were stationed—armed with shovels and brawn, forever changed the landscape of the Sunflower State. The physical remnants of these diverse CCC camps in Kansas are difficult to overlook.53

Furthermore, World War II caused the CCC to redirect its conservation efforts to national defense. The education classes teaching soil conservation to the enrollees, as well as some vocational skills, were altered to prepare the men for military service. For instance, in May 1941 enrollees of the all-black Company 767 near Effingham were taught clerk training, first aid, and mechanics, all of which would be utilized greatly in the wartime mobilization effort.53

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States entered World War II. After that, the corps did nothing but war-related work, and many camps closed even before the final dissolution of the CCC. By this time most of the enrollees, including those working in Kansas, had been honorably discharged to find private employment or were already enlisted in the military. In early 1941 forty-three CCC-ID enrollees from all four American Indian reservations in Kansas enlisted in the National Guard. Twelve former CCC-ID enrollees were working for the Milwaukee Road Railroad in Illinois by July 1941.54

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51. “Negro History,” ChatterBox, February 1935. For more information on Woodson, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and Negro History Week, see Brundage, Southern Past, 162–82.