

COPING WITH THE DEPRESSION IN YORK COUNTY

When Franklin D. Roosevelt was sworn into office in March 1933 he had a mandate from the people to do everything possible to combat the Great Depression. Among the many bills passed by the Congress in the "First Hundred Days" was the Unemployment Relief Act which created the Energy Conservation Work Program. That program, known best for the Civilian Conservation, or C. C. C., was to affect every county in the nation.

In 1935, Camp Tom Johnston was built at Ebenezer near Rock Hill to work on the Fishing Creek Project, an aid to farmers in soil conservation.

Camp Tom Johnston was named for Thomas Lynn Johnston, president of the Peoples National Bank of Rock Hill.

The same year, a soil conservation nursery was started at Mount Holly. Its purpose was to grow pine seedlings and kudzu for farmers to use to control erosion. Eventually, the Mount Holly facility furnished plantings for the entire southeastern United States. The pine seedlings flourished and were a major reason that the English Bowater Corporation built in York County about 15 years later. The value of the kudzu is still being questioned.

The Mount Holly facility grew over 25 million plants in its best year. Later, that production was taken over by the S. C. Commission of forestry and by private producers.

The Fishing Creek Project was operated under that name from 1935 to 1938. In 1938, when the C. C. C. camps were phased out, the Catawba District was organized to continue the conservation work. The Catawba District covered York, Chester, Lancaster and Fairfield Counties.

The Tom Johnston C. C. C. camp at Ebenezer, was a camp for unemployed males (there was no female equivalent) aged 17 to 25. The men, usually single, enlisted for six months at a time, with 2 years the maximum time permitted.

Enlistees were paid \$30 a month with \$22 of that amount sent to the enlistee's family. Almost all of the C. C.C. volunteers came from tenant family ranks. As it turned out, they probably were better clothed and better fed than they had ever been. The Great Depression had not begun in South Carolina in 1929. The state had been in an agricultural depression since 1921.

There were about 200 men at Camp Tom Johnston led by an army captain with two junior officers, one a doctor. There was also a superintendent, an educational advisor, foremen, a clerk-stenographer, a blacksmith and a mechanic.

According to standard procedure, every camp had four barracks, sleeping 50 youths (head-to-toe to prevent spread of disease), arranged in a quadrangle. Other buildings provided space for a mess hall, recreation and classrooms. The academic program offered the usual subjects plus instruction in electrical wiring, radio repair, agriculture, landscaping, forestry and clerical work.

The day began at 6 a.m. when the boys dressed in government-issue clothing. After a hearty breakfast (their daily calorie allotment was 3,800), trucks carried them to forest sites where they built trails, cleared campsites, drained swamps, thinned trees and fought forest fires, if need be.

At 5 p.m. the boys boarded the trucks for return to camp for food and fellowship. Planned recreation helped to keep morale high. Baseball and horseshoe pitching on good days and pool and Ping-pong in bad weather were favorite diversions.

There was no work on Saturday and Sunday and the youths were permitted to leave camp on Wednesday and Saturday nights.

Of all federal agencies created to combat the Depression, none has been more highly praised than the C. C. C.