

Forest Builders

By *Gwenyth Swain*

Long ago, an army of Minnesota teenagers joined the **Civilian Conservation Corps** and went to camp to work. Here's the story of one young man who signed up to plant trees.

March 1941. A bugle called out *reveille*, an early morning signal for campers to assemble. It was 6 a.m. Fifteen-year-old Lamonte "Monty" Dehn woke up feeling scared and excited. He'd just arrived the day before at Camp Badoura in northern Minnesota, but he already knew the bugle call meant he had 15 minutes to clean up and go to the mess hall for breakfast. By 7 a.m. he would receive his work duties for the rest of the day.

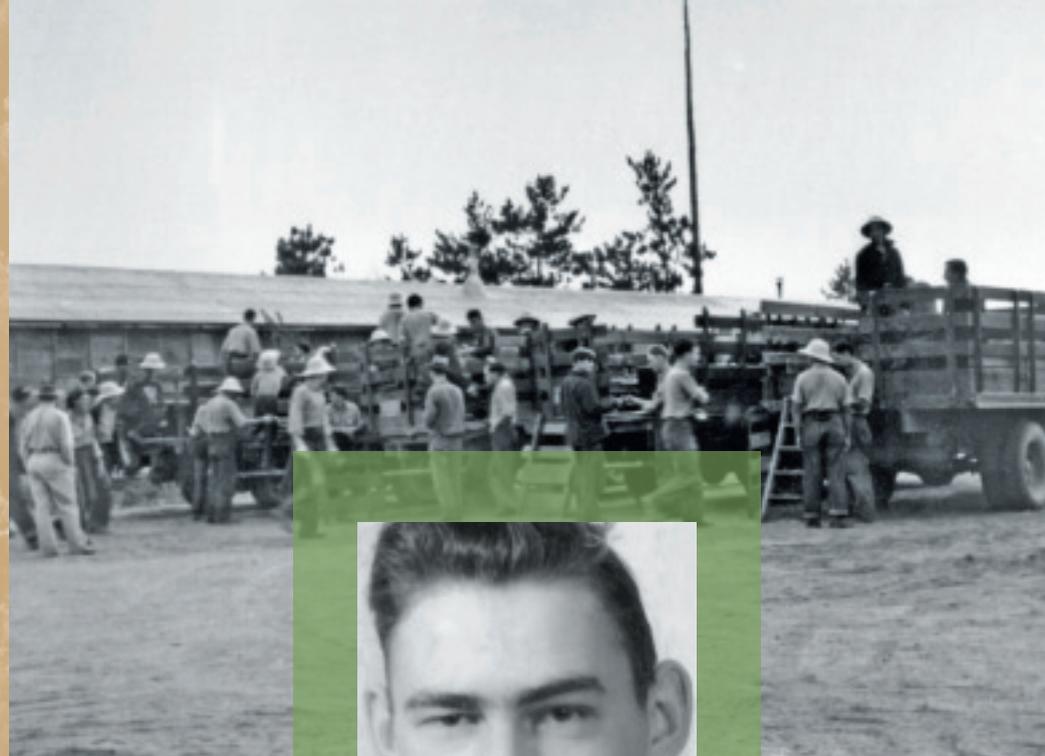
Monty had just joined an army of young men. But "President Roosevelt's Tree Army," as everyone called it, was no regular army. Instead of weapons, Monty and other members of the Civilian Conservation Corps were armed with shovels and basic tools for planting trees, building roads, and fighting fires.

Across Minnesota and the nation, enrollees in the CCC did all kinds of conservation work. Today Monty Dehn is 84 years old, and his memories shed light on how the CCC shaped Minnesota's landscape. His story also shows how, during hard times, the CCC gave hope to a generation of young men and boys.

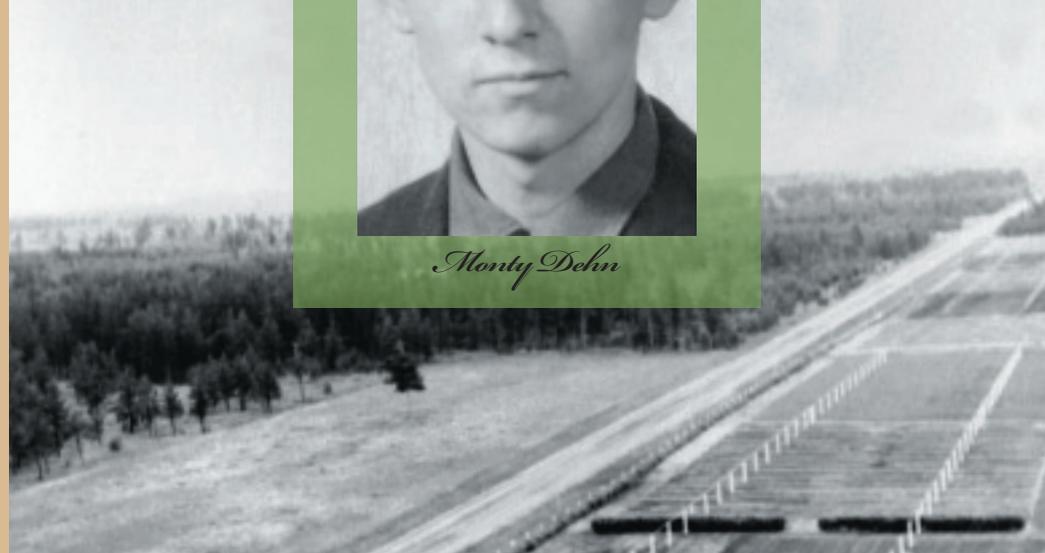
Young
Naturalists



TOP, 1983.0071.0010 AND BOTTOM 1983.0071.0026; CCC CO 2708, 5-144, AKELEY, MN, 1937; EINO LAHTI PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION; MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER RESEARCH LIBRARY & ARCHIVES, CHISHOLM, MN 55719. CENTER PHOTO COURTESY OF MONTY DEHN.



Monty Dehn



Trucks (top) carried Civilian Conservation Corps enrollees to their jobs planting trees and constructing roads, bridges, and buildings. CCC enrollee Monty Dehn helped raise and plant trees at Badoura State Forest Nursery (bottom). Like many CCC projects, the nursery is still used today.



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Great Depression

When Monty joined the CCC in 1941, the United States was still experiencing hard times. The trouble with businesses, jobs, and money began in October 1929 when the stock market collapsed and investors lost millions of dollars. Many banks were forced to shut down, and money became scarce. So were jobs—unemployment reached 25 percent. Over the next dozen years, the government tried to mend the economy with programs to provide jobs and food for families.

In a recent interview, Monty recalls

the scene: “It was Depression time, and Depression meant my dad was out of work.” Monty and his family were living in Little Falls in central Minnesota. Monty was juggling school and two part-time jobs: delivering newspapers and setting pins at a bowling alley. Still, Monty wasn’t earning much, and the family was forced to go on *relief*, a government food program.

To get their weekly relief, the family stood in line at the post office or courthouse for a box of food (mostly oatmeal,

Women prepared food baskets (opposite page) for people in need in 1936. During the Great Depression people often went hungry. The families of the young men who worked in the CCC received \$25 a month, which could buy a lot of food. In 1935 a pound of steak cost 26 cents, and 100 pounds of potatoes cost \$1.35.

powdered milk, and other dry foods). Not much for a family with seven children, Monty said. As the oldest child, he felt responsible to help out. When he heard about a new program “getting young men off the street” and paying them \$30 each month, he jumped at the chance to join.

“It was kind of a news flash from the employment office in Little Falls, stating that if there was any young men, 17 to 25 years of age, that would be interested in any kind of conservation [work], that they would be accepting applicants.”

He was interested, but was he old enough? “Well, it says 17 to 25, and I’m only 15.” Monty hadn’t finished 10th grade, and he’d never really been away from home. But he knew he had to help his family. “We talked it over, and I says, ‘Well, I suppose I’d be in Minnesota, so it wouldn’t be so far away.’” Monty’s parents signed a permission slip so officials would allow him to join though he hadn’t reached the 17-year-old age minimum. Before long, the teenager was headed to Camp Ripley to officially enroll in the CCC.



What Was the CCC?

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was sworn in as president on March 4, 1933, he already had several ideas for fighting the Great Depression. He launched the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, 29 days after he took office, immediately putting unemployed young men to work on “forestry, the prevention of soil erosion, flood control,” and other conservation projects.

Today you can see the impact of the CCC in many Minnesota state parks and forests. For example, along the shores of Lake Superior, the CCC boys constructed massive granite buildings at Gooseberry Falls State Park. Farther north, American Indians in the Civilian Conservation Corps Indian-Division rebuilt the historic meeting place of Indians and European traders at Grand Portage National Monument. CCC boys planted trees in Chippewa and Superior national forests. State forests such as Foot Hills, Land O’Lakes, and Beltrami Island have trees planted by the boys of the CCC.

1983.0071.0003 CCC CO 2700, S-144, AKELEY, MINN., 1937; EINO LAHTI PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION; MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER RESEARCH LIBRARY & ARCHIVES, CHISHOLM, MN 55719



The CCC was not part of the military, but President Roosevelt asked the Army to organize the hundreds of thousands of men who enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps. With the Army in charge, CCC workers wore surplus military uniforms (top), slept in military-style barracks (above), and had to obey orders from camp officers.

Enrolling in the CCC

Camp Ripley was, and still is, a military camp for the National Guard. Many of the officers who ran CCC camps were National Guard or Army men.

All at once people were shouting orders at Monty, and he had to obey. “Yeah, it was a little bit different,” Monty recalls. “And it was kind of a rude awakening for a 15-year-old kid, growing up so fast. But I really didn’t mind it for the simple reason that I figured, well, maybe the orders that I’d get would be good for me to listen to and do what I’m told for a change. And I did. I learned, and I grew up fast.”

At Camp Ripley Monty received a physical examination, including shots, and a heavy, brown wool soldier’s uniform, left over from World War I. Monty said his shoes were a challenge: “I was only wearing a size 9 shoe, and I got size 10s. And they says, ‘Don’t worry about it. Just put a few extra socks on.’”

Monty filled out piles of paper forms, including one that said the government would be sending most of his pay to his parents. As Monty put it, the program was meant “primarily to help families . . . having it tough.” Out of his monthly \$30, he got \$5. But he didn’t mind holding onto so little of his pay: “Sounds good to me, you know. Five dollars a month seemed like a lot. A quarter or even 50 cents was a lot of money in those times.”

Camp Badoura

Still sore from his shots and getting used to his too-big shoes, Monty joined two other Little Falls teens—Freddy and Bob DeRosier—for the nearly 100-mile ride north to Camp Badoura and their new life in the CCC. Monty couldn’t help but feel a bit lonesome, being so far from home, but he sure liked the setting for the camp, nestled in the spruce and pine woods between Nevis and Park Rapids. “Lots of lakes,” Monty remembers. “Every

time you’d turn around, you’d see a lake.” Like most CCC camps, Badoura had a military feel—neat, orderly, no-frills buildings, including a mess hall or canteen for meals, an infirmary where CCCers could see a doctor if they got sick or injured, and barracks where metal beds filled a long room with a low ceiling. The buildings had woodstoves, and on cold nights boys on fireguard duty would have to stay awake to keep the fires burning.

Camp Badoura (below) near Park Rapids was set up similarly to other CCC camps. Officers were stationed in a 1 headquarters building. Enrollees were housed in 2 barracks. Camps had a 3 classroom and library. 4 Maintenance shops were for tools and equipment. Breakfast and dinner were served in the 5 mess hall.



TOP LEFT, 1983.0071.0013; BOTTOM LEFT, 1983.0071.0036; AND BOTTOM RIGHT, 1983.0071.0045; CCC CO 2708; S-144; AKELEY, MN, 1937; EINO LAHTI PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION; MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER RESEARCH LIBRARY & ARCHIVES, CHISHOLM, MN 55719.

The work. Monty worked outdoors every weekday, all day long. He had lunch outdoors, eating sandwiches while sitting on a rock or tree stump. Until a bugle called *retreat* at day's end, Monty



DNR PHOTO

stayed busy clearing brush to prepare land for tree planting, building fire lookout towers, creating firebreaks, fighting fires, or driving trucks large and small.

As a member of “President Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” Monty had expected to be planting trees. He hadn’t imag-

ined he’d be growing those trees from seeds. “We planted those [seeds] in a box, just sprinkling the seeds in a kind of soil trough. Then we’d cover them up, wet them all down, and then periodically we had to water them so they kept on growing. And they were under lights, so that there was heat on them, so they would grow faster. We built the frames and put canvas over the top and lights inside.”

After tending the seedlings for a few months, the CCC crew took the next steps. “After it got warmer, like in May, we took them out of the boxes. One guy would dig in the ground and tip it, and we would put that seedling in the ground and then push the soil back and pat it and stamp on it. We did that about every 3 feet apart.”

The CCC crews planted enough trees to make a forest. “That’s what it was, really. We were building forests.”

Monty isn’t boasting when he says he built forests. Many of the seedlings that he planted in 1941 are still growing today. “Ever been around Park Rapids and Nevis and through that area? If you see areas with rows and rows of trees that are maybe about this big,” Monty says as he holds out his hands to show a circle as big as a large pizza, “and they’re going straight up in the air . . .” Those are the forests Monty planted.



LEFT, 1993-2833-0015, RIGHT, 1993-2833-0039; CCC CO 71.6, F-10, TOFTE, MN, 1934-1936; ROSS HULMAN PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION; MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER RESEARCH LIBRARY & ARCHIVES, CHISHOLM, MN 55719.



CCC workers raised and planted tree seedlings (opposite page) at a state forest nursery. Enrollees (left) were often undernourished when they arrived at their post, but food was plentiful in the mess hall (right). Within a few months, new enrollees often gained 10 pounds or more.

Growing up. The boys (as CCCers nicknamed themselves) grew stronger as they learned to work full days, five days a week. They matured as they learned to thoroughly clean up after themselves in order to pass frequent Army-style inspections. And many grew bigger as they ate regular meals. Some found out for the first time how great it felt to have a full stomach.

“As the story goes, the first 30 days you were losing weight,” says Monty, “and after that, inside of six months,

you had put on 10 pounds or better and had already grown an inch or two.”

“It was good, a balanced diet,” Monty remembers. Breakfasts were hot and plentiful. Dinners were even better. Lunches were frequently served cold, out in the woods. “Usually you got a sandwich, and it could be peanut butter and jelly or it could be summer sausage or whatever they’d make—minced ham, they called it.” Everybody drank coffee. Anyone who threw out food got into a lot of trouble with the *dog robbers*, who were assigned to check the camp trash cans for discarded food.



Closing Time

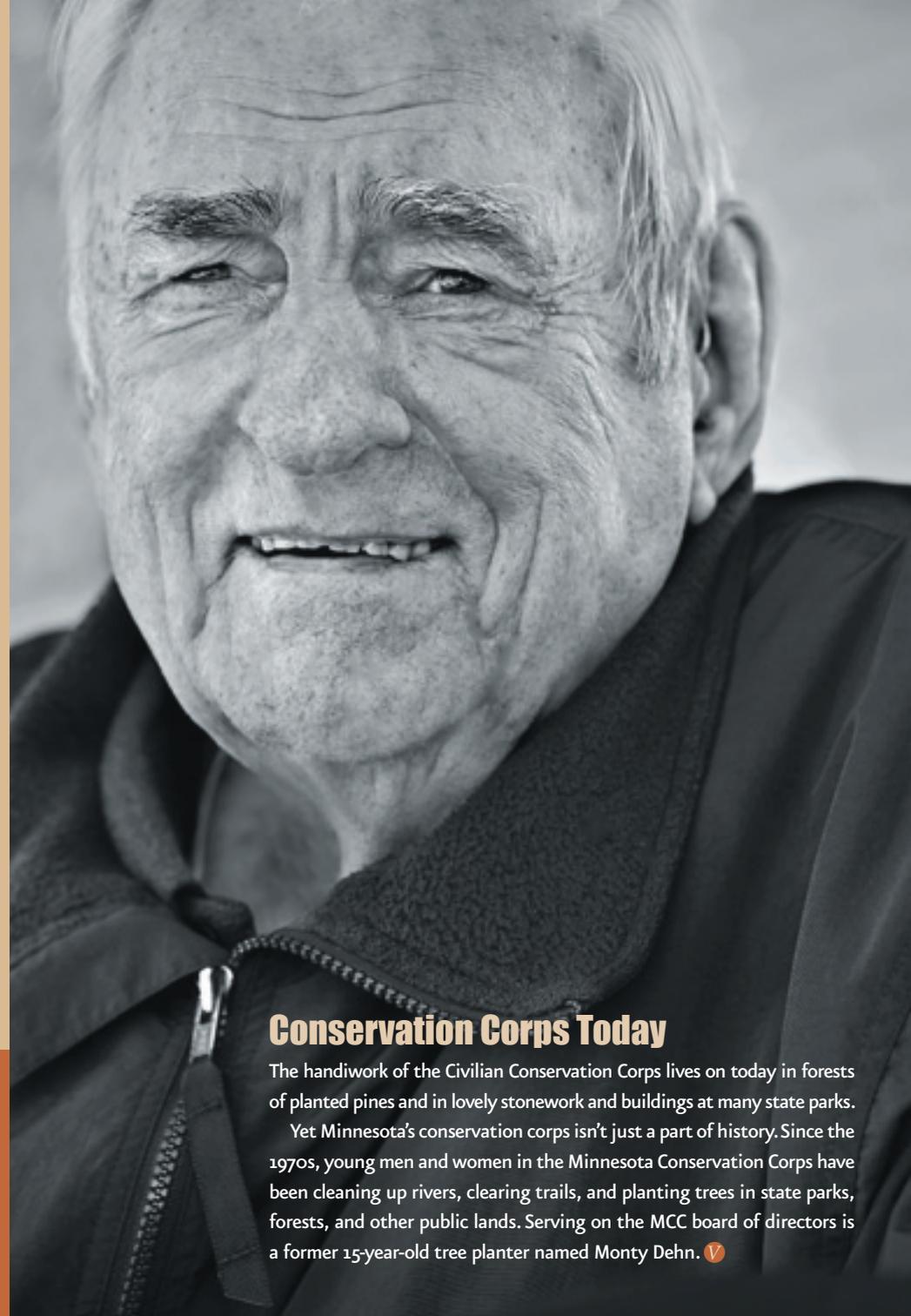
Monty vividly recalls the beginning of the end of the CCC in late 1941. “On the morning of December the 7th, we were all sitting around at breakfast at the mess hall. And it came over the radio. I think it was Walter Winchell. ‘I bring you a news bulletin: The Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor.’ And a bunch of them around the table said, ‘My God, we’re going to have to go to war!’”

The United States entered World War II shortly after Japanese forces bombed the U.S. naval installation at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. With resources and men diverted to the war, CCC camps started closing.

Monty took his new skills of planting, building, and truck driving from job to job, until he was old enough to be drafted as a soldier. After the war, he had no problem finding a construction job because employers knew that CCC alumni worked hard. Monty’s credentials eventually helped him land a job with the Hennepin County sheriff’s department, where he worked for 28 years.

Like giant puzzles, fire towers were assembled from pre-made parts by CCC workers.

TOP: 1983.0071.0041, CCC CO 2708, S-144, AKELEY, MN, 1937, EINO LAHTI PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION; BOTTOM, 1993.2833.0039; CCC CO 7116, F-10, TOFTE, MN, 1934 - 1936; ROSS HULMAN PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION; MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER RESEARCH LIBRARY & ARCHIVES, CHISHOLM, MN 55719. RIGHT HAND PAGE, PORTRAIT OF MONTY DEHN BY MARC NORBERG



Conservation Corps Today

The handiwork of the Civilian Conservation Corps lives on today in forests of planted pines and in lovely stonework and buildings at many state parks.

Yet Minnesota’s conservation corps isn’t just a part of history. Since the 1970s, young men and women in the Minnesota Conservation Corps have been cleaning up rivers, clearing trails, and planting trees in state parks, forests, and other public lands. Serving on the MCC board of directors is a former 15-year-old tree planter named Monty Dehn. 

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Find links to teachers guides to this and other stories online at www.mndnr.gov/young_naturalists.

To learn more about MCC, visit www.conservationcorps.org.

For more CCC stories and teaching tools, see “In Their Words: Stories of Minnesota’s Greatest Generation” at <http://stories.mnhs.org/mgg/index.html>.