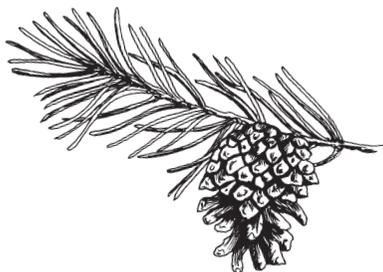




WISCONSIN FOREST TALES

BY JULIA PFERDEHIRT ILLUSTRATIONS BY PAMELA HARDEN



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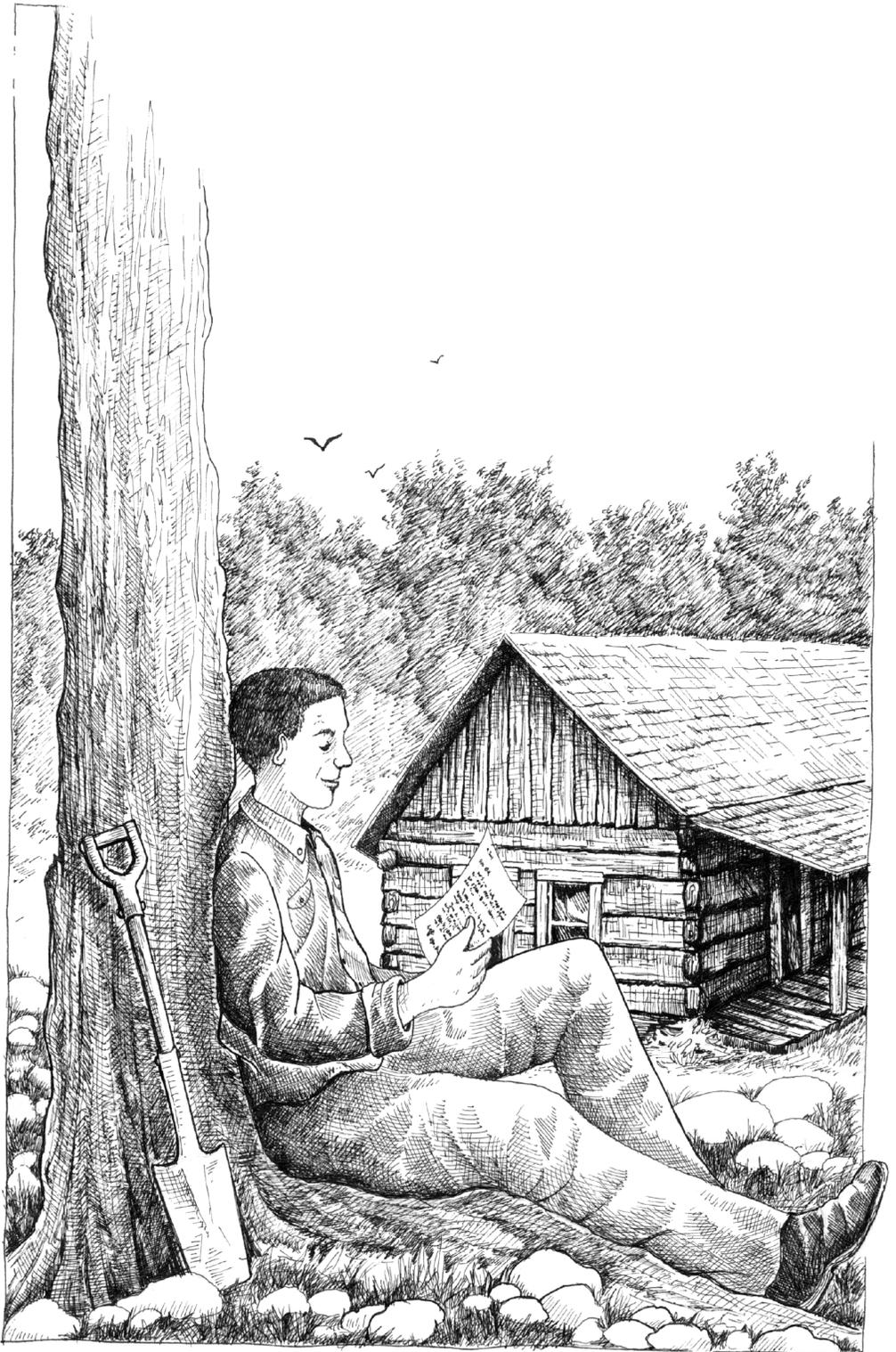
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CHAPTER FIVE INTRODUCTION



IN OUR STORY ABOUT farming the cutover, Will and his whole family worked day and night, but they just couldn't make enough money. Will saw the worry in his pa's eyes. He saw the sadness on his mother's face. Then icy rocks and a sharp ax brought Will's pa to the doctor's office—with a bloody gash and a broken leg. The last bit of hope drained out of Will. That's it, Will thought. Without Pa, we'll lose our farm.

Mr. Anderson, the forester, took Will home from the doctor's office and told Will about President Roosevelt's big idea: the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps).

Like thousands of other young men in almost every state in the United States, Will applied for a job with the CCC. President Roosevelt wanted men willing to learn and work. Not everybody was hired by the CCC. Boys with police records for crime or fighting were turned down.

Our friend Will was sent to Illinois to be trained. At Fort Sheridan, he was taught how to plant trees and fight fires. And like every boy in the CCC, Will met other CCCers—city and country boys, college boys and dropouts.

The CCC gave Will a paying job. More than that, the CCC changed Will's life.



WRITING HOME

July 5, 1933

Dear Ma, Pa, Elsie, Margaret, and Clara,

Since I jumped on the train in Chippewa Falls earlier this month, seems like the whole world has changed. We rode all day and night to Fort Sheridan down in Illinois. Folks call the CCC “President Roosevelt’s Army”—well, it’s a lot like being in the army.

The camp’s full of young men. City boys from Chicago and Milwaukee. Farm boys from all over—Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. We don’t march like soldiers, but we sure work like them.

We’re awake before sunrise. You should hear those city boys grumble! One Chicago guy said, “If human beings were supposed to see the sun come up, it would happen at eight o’clock when normal people are awake!”

By five o’clock we’re up and scrambling for a place at the sink. The commander says, “Showers once a week. Fingernails clean. Everybody shaves. No arguments!”

The boy in the bunk next to me couldn’t find a whisker to shave if his life depended on it. But the boss says, “Shave!” so, every morning, Johnny shaves. But he doesn’t put a blade in his razor!

All day we have classes or work—forestry, tree planting, and firefighting.

They say the CCC has camps all over the country. Some guys will go to the Rocky Mountains. Some to Louisiana. Think of that—thousands of CCC boys just like me!

I hope I can come home to Wisconsin.

I’m missing all of you.

Love,

Will

July 13, 1933

Dear Elsie, Margaret, and Clara,

The CCC is going to turn me into a muscle man! Every morning we chow down a breakfast big enough to feed our whole family. Then, exercises. We run and jump and do push-ups. Yesterday, the boys started a song while we were running. You should have heard 200 guys sing, "Every girl is sweet on me 'cause I'm in the CCC."

The Chicago boys sing, "No more city life for me. Now I'm in the CCC." Then the farm boys sing, "No more milkin' cows for me. Now I'm in the CCC."

The supervisor reads our work lists every morning. Today they taught us how to cut trees. Think of that! I've been lumberjacking with Pa since I was no taller than a stump!

The teacher got me to help. Those Chicago boys don't know which side of a crosscut saw goes to the wood!

I miss you all.

Your brother,

Will

July 18, 1933

Dear Ma and Pa,

I'm feeling a little more at home. John, the boy in the bunk next to mine, comes from a hog farm outside Peshtigo. Says his pa was just a boy when Peshtigo burned. He lived through the fire by dunking himself in the river! I'm glad for a buddy from home.

They work us hard. Most of us fall asleep before we hit the pillow.

Never seen so much food in my life. Bacon, eggs, flapjacks, coffee, pie, and enough milk to float the whole camp to Missouri! Guess the government wants to fatten up some of the city boys. They're a scrawny bunch.

Most of the boys in camp are from cities. Chicago and Indianapolis. Some from Milwaukee, too. I grew up in Chicago, so I thought we'd get along just fine.

But the Chicago boys seem to think they're better than boys from the farms. Every day the commander reads the work list. You should hear those city boys complain. They wouldn't last an hour hauling rocks on the farm.

One day my chore was latrine duty. One of the Chicago boys laughed and said, "Just the job for a farm boy! He won't even notice the smell."

Pa, how can I be friends with guys like these?

Missing you all.

Your son,

Will

July 27, 1933

Dear Will,

Clara has decided she's going to sign up for the CCC. Last night at supper she announced, "If Will can cut trees, so can I." She made up a tune to your song, "No more milkin' cows for me, 'cause I'm in the CCC." You should have heard her singing it in the barn this morning. Milking cows, of course!

Son, those city boys are a problem. Remember your ma's words, "If you can't say something kind, don't say anything at all." When we read your letter, your ma said, "Tell Will to throw out kindness and kindness will come back to him."

Sounds easier to say than do. But remember, I know about farming and logging. Your ma knows about folks' hearts.

We're missing you. The first \$25 from your CCC pay came. Your ma and I are going to save and buy more milk cows.

Son, your CCC pay will turn us into dairy farmers. We couldn't do it without you!

Love,

Pa

August 3, 1933

Dear Ma, Pa, Elsie, Margaret, and Clara,

Bad news, Clara. The CCC doesn't take girls! Besides, you wouldn't want to sleep in this bunkhouse. Smells like wet wool, sweaty boys, and old socks. We scrub the place on our hands and knees, but . . .

I thought the CCC couldn't teach us farm boys anything about hard work! But then we planted trees. Whoa! We're bent over all day with a trowel in one hand and a basket of seedling trees on our belts. It's like a bent-over dance: step, dig, push a seedling in the hole, pat the dirt around it. Step, dig, push, pat. Step, dig, push, pat. Over and over and over.

The next morning I felt muscles I didn't know I had. And every one of them hurt.

Foresters came to talk about reforestation. That's planting the forests again. The CCC boys will plant millions and millions of baby trees all across the country. The foresters said they had set up nurseries in Wisconsin to grow seedlings.

I'd like to see the cutover turned into forest again. Think of it! White pines and birch trees. So beautiful!

Yesterday a truck pulled in with boxes of books for the library. Not many, but it's a start.

Missing you all. Plant some potatoes in the garden for me!

Love,

Will

P.S.: Ma, I'm still thinking of what you said about throwing out kindness to the city boys. Yesterday a Chicago boy said Johnny should clean out the horse stalls because he'd be right at home with manure. Next thing I knew, Johnny and that boy were rolling around on the ground, punching and hollering. I pulled them apart and yelled to cool down and stop acting like kids. Now the Chicago boys have set their sights on me!

August 10, 1933

Dear Ma, Pa, and girls,

This week the foresters talked our ears off. I learned more than I ever wanted to know about soil (a fancy word for good old Wisconsin dirt).

The forester said tree roots hold on to the soil. When we cut the trees, the soil washes away. Remember Mr. Karlov's creek? After a rain, he used to say half his farm had run down the hill and jumped into the water.

So I guess there's some good in busting my back tree planting.

I'm learning how to stop erosion—that's another fancy word for dirt washing away in the rain. Today I couldn't help laughing. The boss marched twenty of us out into a field. The forester showed us how the rain digs ditches in the dirt. Every rainfall, the ditches get deeper. More dirt washes into the river. The CCC's job is to stop erosion.

You'll never guess how. Rocks and trees! Pa, we spent ten years on the farm pulling seedling trees and hauling rocks out of the fields—now I'm planting trees and hauling rocks back in!

Tell Elsie and Margaret that hauling rocks in is just as much fun as hauling them out.

I signed up for schooling, Ma. Some of the guys are learning to build houses. Tell Mr. Anderson I'm taking a forestry class.

The commander's library is a real gold mine. I found Jack London's great book *Call of the Wild*. Last night I started reading to the guys in the bunkhouse before lights-out. Ma, you wouldn't believe it. Some of these guys have never heard of Jack London!

Missing you every day.

Love,

Will

August 14, 1933

Dear Ma and Pa,

Pa and Ma, I'm in real trouble. Two days ago, the commander put me in charge of the job lists. "Pick up the list at my office," he said. "Make sure the list is tacked on the chow house door before breakfast."

The first morning I snatched up the list and ran to the chow house. Thomas and Leon, two Chicago boys, were waiting on the steps. "Hey, farm boy," Leon hollered. "You the commander's pet now?"

Thomas laughed. "Well, let's hear you read the list. That is, unless you're too good to read anything but that fancy Callin' in the Wild book."

I could feel my face get hot. Pa, I wanted to wallop those boys! I stuck the list to the door with a thumbtack and turned to walk away.

Leon grabbed my arm. "I said, read the list!" He growled like an angry dog.

I said, "Read it yourself, Leon." I pushed him away. Before I knew it, I was on the ground. Leon was punching me. I was punching Leon. We were rolling around in the dirt. Then I looked up. Guess who had seen the whole fight? The commander.

Now I'm in detention. The commander says he'll talk to me tomorrow. I'm so afraid I've let all of you down. What if they kick me out of the CCC? We'll lose the farm!

I know better than to fight, but it was like Leon just lit a stick of dynamite inside me.

I'm awful sorry.

Love,

Will

August 17, 1933

Dear Ma and Pa,

Well, my time in detention's over. I'm not kicked out. I'm not even in trouble. But I'm surprised how things turned out.

Remember how Ma used to say we don't really know what a man does until we understand why he does it? That's just what happened to me.

Leon picked that fight with me. He threw the first punch. The commander saw everything. I guess I knew what Leon did, I just didn't understand why.

The commander called me into his office. I stood straight as a pine trunk. My heart was pounding and my mind was whirling like a tornado cloud. I was a fool to fight with Leon. All I could think of was losing my job. Losing the farm. Losing your good opinion of me.

The commander called me *Son*. Just like you do, Pa, when you want me to listen with my heart instead of my ears.

"Son," the commander said. "Why do you think Leon took a swing at you?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know, sir. But I . . ." I felt hot tears filling my eyes. It was bad enough that I might be booted out of the CCC, but I didn't want to stand in the commander's office and cry like a kid.

The commander smiled. I couldn't believe my eyes. He said, "Will, I'm not going to send you home. You're a good man."

Pa and Ma, I felt like a thousand pounds of worry had lifted right off my shoulders! My knees were wobbly as a newborn calf!

Then the commander told me why Leon started the fight. "Leon can't read. Not a word. Neither can Thomas. When you didn't read the job list for them, they were afraid folks would find out."

Ma, I never thought American boys couldn't read. Immigrants, maybe. Old folks, maybe. But young American boys? A wave of sadness washed away my angry feelings. Everything changed. We've

been as poor as dirt, but we always had books. But Leon didn't even have that.

I understood why Leon made fun of the farm boys. We could read and he couldn't.

The commander said, "That's why I read the jobs out loud every day. Leon and Thomas aren't the only boys who can't read."

The commander let me think about that. Did he mean a lot of the boys couldn't read? Now I felt hot tears for another reason!

Then the commander said, "I've heard you reading *Call of the Wild* in the bunkhouse at night. I want you to keep on reading."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "In a month you're all getting transfers. You're going up to Moose Lake in Wisconsin. You're a good worker and you know the land. But you have something else to do in Moose Lake besides plant trees and fight fires."

I couldn't imagine what the commander was talking about.

"Leon and Thomas are headed for Moose Lake, too. And some other boys who can't read." The commander lifted a stack of books from his desk. Schoolbooks. For reading.

"Your punishment for fighting will be to teach Leon and Thomas to read. And anybody else I send your way," the commander said.

"Leon and Thomas won't like that much," I said.

The commander laughed. "Not at first, they won't. But I watched them while you read *Call of the Wild*. They want to read. I could see it in their eyes. You'll start here and keep teaching up in Moose Lake."

So, Ma and Pa, you can tell Elsie and Margaret and Clara that I'm still in the CCC.

I'm going to start just by reading *Call of the Wild*. Maybe the commander is right. Maybe Leon and Thomas really do want to read. Maybe there are other boys listening to Jack London every night and wishing they could read, too.

The commander says we're going to learn how to fight fires

before they send us up to Moose Lake. That's three weeks. Maybe by then Leon and Thomas will learn to like this farm boy!

Remember how I dreamed of being a teacher back in Chicago? When we moved to the cutover I let go of that dream. I had to let it die.

Maybe the dream hasn't died after all! Maybe the hard times are over. Maybe, just maybe, the good times have begun!

I'll write you again before we leave for Moose Lake.

Love to you all,

Will



WHS 6095

The 643rd Co. CCC Camp Virgin Lake, near Three Lakes, Wisconsin.

FINDING WORK

IMAGINE THAT half the people in your town didn't have a job. What if there were no jobs in the factories or stores? What would happen? During the Great Depression, Americans were out of work. Businesses closed. Workers couldn't find jobs anywhere. Young people couldn't find work.

One of the first things Franklin Roosevelt did as president was start the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). He wanted to put young people to work. People called the CCC "Roosevelt's Army."



WHS 6815

Inside the bunkhouse of the Long Lake CCC Camp F.



HELPING IN MANY WAYS

CCC BOYS CAME from every state. Some lived in big cities. Some were from farms. The average CCC boy didn't graduate from eighth grade! So the CCC taught everything from reading to auto mechanics to cooking.

The CCC paid \$30 a month. The boys kept \$5 for fun. The remaining \$25 was sent home. Families like the one in our story depended on that \$25 to "get by" during the hard times of the Depression.

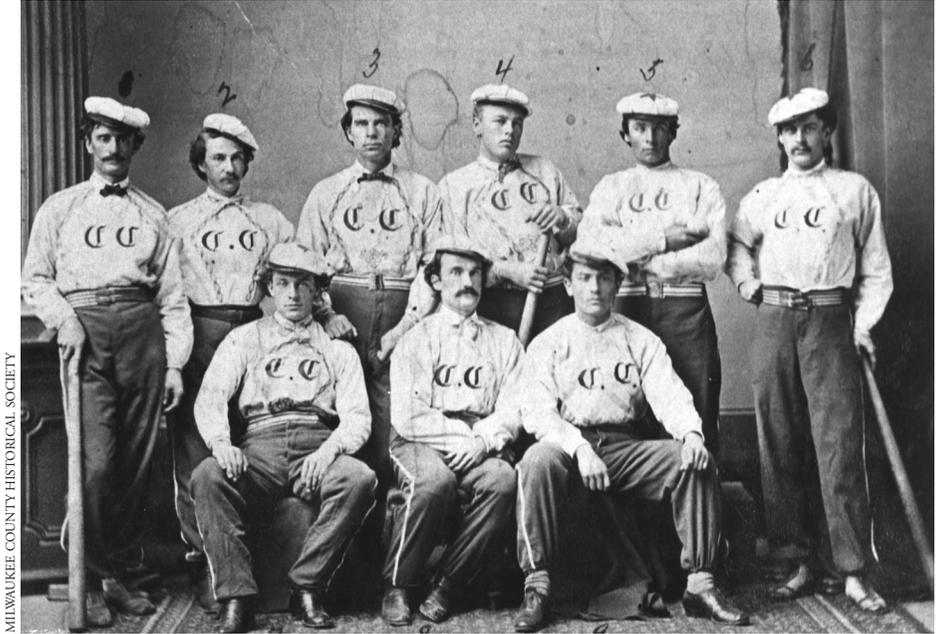
President Roosevelt said the CCC would plant trees to turn the cutover land back into "beautiful forest." This is called reforestation.

CCC men also fought fires, put up thousands of miles of telephone lines, built roads and bridges, and created beautiful parks on abandoned land.



CCC workers planting trees in northern Wisconsin.

WHS 6812



MILWAUKEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

When the CCC boys had time off, they liked to watch baseball. (Here the Milwaukee Cream City Baseball Club is pictured.) They also liked to go to dances and movies.

ALL WORK AND NO PLAY?

CCC BOYS WERE up before sunrise. Their days were filled with work, classes, training, and more work. No TV. No girls. No e-mail or video games.

All work and no play? No! CCC boys worked hard and played hard.

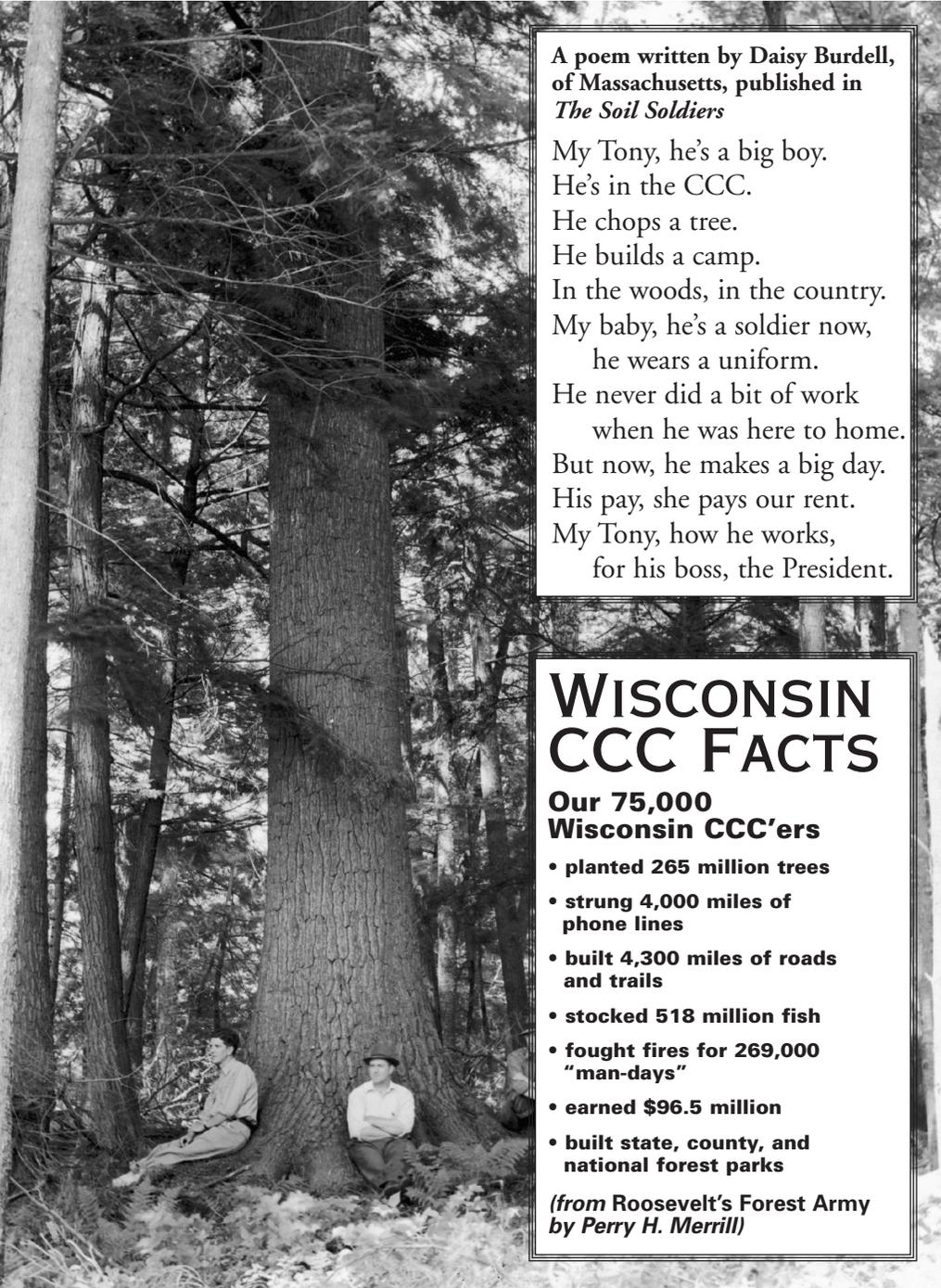
Every camp had sports teams. Weekend wrestling tournaments and football games were something to look forward to. Boys saved their \$5 "fun money" each month for a movie in town. When the 4-H or a local church held a dance, every CCC boy showed up, ready for fun.

FIRE!

Forest fires were a big problem in Wisconsin. A spark from a railroad engine or an unwatched campfire could start a fire. Remember the Peshtigo fire?

Foresters tried to spot small fires before they became big ones. But even if a fire was spotted, the forester might have to drive miles to phone for help. Then who would fight the fire?

Fire prevention and firefighting was another job for the CCC. Workers built lookout towers. CCC men fought fires.



A poem written by Daisy Burdell, of Massachusetts, published in *The Soil Soldiers*

My Tony, he's a big boy.
He's in the CCC.
He chops a tree.
He builds a camp.
In the woods, in the country.
My baby, he's a soldier now,
he wears a uniform.
He never did a bit of work
when he was here to home.
But now, he makes a big day.
His pay, she pays our rent.
My Tony, how he works,
for his boss, the President.

WISCONSIN CCC FACTS

**Our 75,000
Wisconsin CCC'ers**

- planted 265 million trees
- strung 4,000 miles of phone lines
- built 4,300 miles of roads and trails
- stocked 518 million fish
- fought fires for 269,000 "man-days"
- earned \$96.5 million
- built state, county, and national forest parks

*(from Roosevelt's Forest Army
by Perry H. Merrill)*