

# Mr. Roosevelt's Tree Army

By Julia Pferdehirt

A Readers Theater script to accompany chapter 5 (Writing Home) of the historical fiction book [\*Wisconsin Forest Tales\*](#).

Author Julia Pferdehirt wrote this Readers Theater script as a way to introduce chapter 5 of the [\*Wisconsin Forest Tales\*](#) book and give students an opportunity to read aloud with classmates. Students take turns reading at each asterisk (\*) within the script.

## Mr. Roosevelt's Tree Army

\* It was 1930. Times were hard across the whole United States. Jobs were scarce.

Businesses weren't making money. This problem was so big that only a really big idea would solve it. President Franklin Roosevelt had that big idea.

\* This was the problem: In every country, people work. They earn and spend money.

Businesses earn money and give people jobs. That's called the *economy*.

\* When a country's economy is strong and healthy, there are many good-paying jobs.

People buy what they want and need. As people spend money, businesses grow. Growing businesses can pay their workers more money.

\* When the economy is bad, jobs are hard to find. Pay is low. People don't have money to spend, so businesses can't sell their products.

\* Every country's economy has good times and not-so-good times. In the United States, the economy almost fell apart in the 1920s. At first, the economy was not-so-good. Then, it got worse. More and more people lost their jobs. People didn't have money to spend.

Without customers, companies went out of business. Then even more people lost their jobs!

\* You can imagine what happened! No jobs. No money. People couldn't pay their rent or house payments. Businesses couldn't pay their workers. The whole country was suffering.

\* This was called the Depression. Imagine long lines of people applying for just few jobs. Imagine whole towns where most people were out of work. Imagine your parents going out every day to look for a job - any job - and returning at night with the same, bad news. No work.

\* Young people had the worst time. When companies didn't have jobs for older, experienced workers, who would hire a kid without any experience? In cities, young men hung out on the street corners and got into trouble. Country boys couldn't find jobs either. Everyone was discouraged.

\* Then President Roosevelt had that big idea. The government would hire people! He called it the Civilian Conservation Corps. People called it the CCC or President Roosevelt's Tree Army.

\* Thousands and thousands of young men applied. They were sent to build roads, dams, and hiking trails. They put up telephone wires and built fire towers. They were trained to fight forest fires. CCC workers may have built a state park, county park or campground near your town.

\* In Wisconsin, farm boys and city boys worked for the CCC. In northern Wisconsin, CCC workers planted millions of trees where the logging companies had cut down the forests. They turned bare land into state parks and forests. CCC men built nurseries to grow tree seedlings.

\* The CCC was important. Young men learned how to work at different jobs. They sent money home to their families. The CCC also taught young men about the world.

\* In the 1930s, most people didn't travel far from home. A farm boy from Spooner might never have seen the city of Milwaukee. The CCC changed that. City boys made friends with farm boys. A Wisconsin CCC'er might dig ditches with an African-American boy from Chicago, a Latino from New Mexico, or a New York City boy.

\* Today, almost every state, including Wisconsin, has beautiful parks, forests, lakes, and campgrounds because of the hard work of the men of the CCC.

## In the Woods, On the Trail, Around the Campfire: Stories of the CCC

\* Many young men said the CCC changed their lives. Here are some of their true stories.

\* Young men signed up for the CCC to work. They needed jobs and money. They didn't expect to grow up and have adventure and fun, but they did!

\* L.J. Milliken, Camp 832: "I enlisted in the CCC in October, 1935. I lied about my age...I was 15. I was broke and hungry."

\* Louis Schneider, Company 772: "I came from a family of 12 kids...a lot of people were out of work, including my dad. I went into the CCC to keep food in the rest of their mouths and keep them in school."

\* Robert Shaver: "My folks were poor. There wasn't work. I had only a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education. [The CCC paid] an income of \$5 for me and \$25.00 sent home to my family."

\* George Beam: "I had never been away from home and asked my father if I could go. I had never slept on a train."

\* CCC men lived together in big camps. Some CCC camps were old army bases. Some were empty logging camps. Some were open fields with tents.

\* Frances Waters: “We left for Fort Sheridan, north of Chicago. We arrived...after an all-night ride on a milk train. We were then shown to our quarters, which consisted of a tent... There was no wood, so we scrounged along the banks of the lake....If you have ever slept on the shores of Lake Michigan in a tent in November you can imagine....We slept with our clothes on, covered by two blankets.”

\* Phil Mansuell: [Our] barracks had not been winterized. Sometimes there would be two or more inches of frost on the walls and we went to bed with newspapers under our thin mattresses and all possible clothes piled on top of us....We had a...can for drinking water that would freeze solid at night. We also had an old style privy and you can bet there was not much dilly-dallying out there!”

\* CCC men did many different jobs. They worked in almost every state in the country. A Wisconsin boy might be sent to work in New York while a New York boy was sent to Wisconsin! Some CCC men worked near their homes.

\* Jack Vincent: “My job was to teach over 150 boys to read and write at the camp in Richland Center, Wisconsin. They had to write a letter home and read a newspaper....

\* Alden Lane: “Being a city boy it meant a great change in my life when I joined the CCC. I didn’t know an axe from a pick...I had never driven a car...I [learned] jackhammering and blasting. I had charge of the tool room...and learned landscaping.”

\* Walter Mallory, Company 709: “Did we ever work hard! About the first of December, the snow began to fall until the camps were covered with about 18 feet! We had to go and come by a trapdoor in the roof. We had to wear snowshoes to get to the bathhouse....I went...by dog sled to bring the mail.”

\* Arnold Rennie: “This was pine tree country and we cut out the diseased trees. Occasionally we would fight a forest fire....To me the...CCC was the opening of my world. Until that time, it had been limited and poor and so many ways. My parents died when I was six and the grandparents raised me. [They] died not too many months before I went into the CCC.”

\* Chuck Krall, Camp Nine Mile: “We used horses and mules to skid logs to the loading areas...Being a farm boy...I was experienced in handling animals. Well, this one-eyed mule was big and ornery ...You didn’t need a watch at quitting time...because that mule would head for camp right on time...logs and all if she happened to be hitched to one!”

\* “Well, the boss gave me a promotion to a job at the loading dock...[it] lasted exactly one day...no one else could handle the one-eyed mule! I had to go back to skidding logs.”  
After the CCC, Chuck Krall went to college and worked as a soil conservationist.

\* Joseph Aebisher: “I was assigned to...a logging camp with sixteen men and six horses. This was quite a job for a fellow who had been raised on the sidewalks of New York City! ...In January, 1934...The thermometer didn’t get above 30 degrees below zero for twenty-six days. Our crew cut a lot of logs.”

\* The CCC worked winter and summer, rain, snow or sunshine. In Wisconsin alone, CCC men planted 265,631,000 seedling trees! They built 4,390 miles of roads and 483 bridges. All together, CCC men in Wisconsin worked 269,447 “man-days” fighting forest fires!

\* Ed Norman from Helmet, California: “My service was in northern Wisconsin in an area that had been logged over... Our main purpose was to plant trees, to fight fires and build roads.”

\* Cleon Cain, Company 2617, Hayward, Wisconsin: It sure was cold in Wisconsin!  
“We found our shoes frozen to the floor in the morning! We built fire roads into the forests.”

\* Frances Waters: “We had no power saws, just two-man cross-cut ones...Our [job] was to fall [burned] timber...and reforest it with young seedlings. This work soon ended, since we were called out to fight a fire, which burned 40,000 acres.”

\* The CCC men fought huge, dangerous fires with simple tools. They smothered fires with dirt and shovels. They carried tanks of water on their backs and sprayed fires. They built firebreaks to stop fires. At first they used only axes, saws and shovels. Later, bulldozers were invented. A firebreak is a long, wide strip of cleared land. When a fire reaches that strip of bare dirt, it has nothing to burn. But, sometimes, sparks flew over a firebreak and set fire to the grass on the other side. Then, the CCC firefighters were in big trouble!

\* Frances Waters: “We cleared strips about 40 feet wide ahead of the fire and had men [standing] every 15 to 30 feet to make a backfire....The wind changed! The fire lane was jumped and we had to fall back and start all over again. We worked up to 18 hours some days and were we glad to see rain again!”

\* Some people say the CCC saved the country. During the Depression, people couldn't find work. They felt hopeless. The CCC gave more than 3 million men jobs, training and hope. Being in the CCC changed the lives of young men. They met new people. Their view of the world changed.

\* “Hiram Moger, Company 759: “I was inducted May 19, 1933....This was one of the best things that happened to me. I learned how to work falling timber, how to cook...Many boys had jobs driving trucks...heavy equipment...bulldozers....”

\* Hiram Moger: “I was one [of those people] riding a freight train looking for work when the chance came up [to join the CCC]. I always said President Roosevelt took me off a freight train and gave me a bed, clothes and food and made me feel like somebody.”

\* The CCC was an important part of our history. Today, when you walk through a county forest or camp in a state forest you may see trees planted by CCC men. You may push your canoe into a river at a launch site built by CCC workers. Perhaps your town was saved by CCC fire fighters. In Wisconsin, and almost every state in the United States, we owe a big thank-you to President Roosevelt and his Tree Army!