

“WE CAN TAKE IT!”

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Abstract

With the approach of Indiana’s bicentennial, Hoosiers have started to reflect on their state’s rich history. One of the most popular New Deal relief agencies, central to the development of Indiana state parks and forests, was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The program employed over three million young men across the country to complete public works projects from 1933 to 1942. In Indiana, enrollees in 57 camps fought fires, created hiking trails, planted trees, and constructed recreational buildings across the state. CCC Company 517 was one of eight African American companies in Indiana and was stationed in Corydon, South Bend, and Portland between 1933 and 1941. My research examines how Company 517 dealt with racial issues in urban and rural settings, and compares the national and local goals of the CCC in terms of race relations. The men completed recreational public works projects in rural Wyandotte Woods State Park (what is today O’Bannon Woods State Park) and improved the drainage systems in the cities of South Bend and Portland. Racial tensions, sometimes spilling over into violence, peaked when the men of 517 were transferred from the state forest to camps in South Bend and Portland, which were located closer to hostile white communities. To research Company 517, I read through camp newspapers published by 517’s educational program from 1933 to 1941 and utilized scholarly works on the New Deal in Indiana. Many of the veterans of Company 517 attributed their hard work ethic and success later in life to their experience in the CCC.

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“WE CAN TAKE IT!”:

Race and the Civilian Conservation Corps in Indiana, 1934–1941

Katie Martin, American Studies and History

INTRODUCTION

Company 517-C (the “C” indicated that the company was “colored”) was one of eight African American Civilian Conservation Corps companies that existed in Indiana from 1933 to 1941. Company 517 formed a group of men with similar backgrounds and experiences who were self-motivated to overcome the limitations imposed on them as members of a white-dominated organization. The men completed recreational public works projects in rural Harrison County State Forest and Wyandotte Woods State Park (today Harrison-Crawford State Forest and O’Bannon Woods State Park) and relocated in 1937 and 1939, respectively, to improve the drainage systems in the cities of South Bend and Portland. Many New Deal historians argue that the CCC at the national level was ineffective in improving race relations. However, they often ignore the implementation of CCC policies at the local level. Segregated camp life gave the men opportunities they would not have experienced without the creation of the CCC. From 1933 until 1937, the rural Harrison County State Forest setting isolated the 517th from the local white community, afforded educational and vocational opportunities, and promoted a spirit of teamwork. “I’ve never seen such camaraderie anywhere, not even in a fraternity or a church. It’s like blood brothers,” explained Joseph Ramsey, a former member of Corydon’s Company 517 (Penner, 1994). The men constantly renewed their efforts to live up to the motto of the CCC: “We Can Take It!” They sought to improve their status while also conserving valuable land. Limited improvement in race relations did not prevent them from carrying out the work they were hired to complete (Company 517, 1934–1936).

METHODOLOGY

This article traces the accomplishments and the relationships maintained by Company 517 with three white communities in Indiana. The greatest record of Company 517’s activities was chronicled in camp newspapers now digitized through the Center for Research Libraries Global Resources Network and preserved in their original form at the Indiana Historical Society. Throughout Company 517’s existence, the paper was published weekly, monthly, or bimonthly. Almost every CCC camp in the country published a camp paper, written and illustrated by enrollees, usually in conjunction with the camp’s educational program and journalism class. Over 40 newspapers are held in the archival record preserving the history of Company 517 from 1934 to 1941. The newspapers themselves varied from 10 to 25 pages each. The name of Company 517’s newspaper changed as the company moved around the state, and these titles included *Camp Chatter*, *Wyandotte Wahoo*, and *Ditch Dots and Dashes*. Typically, the newspapers included updates related to camp life and words from the educational advisor, camp officers, and other leaders in the first few pages. Then more entertaining material was reported, including CCC recreational sports news, interesting facts, poems submitted by men of the camp, creative stories, community issues, cartoons, announcements for classes, and recreational opportunities, Sunday worship options, and upcoming dances. The newspapers strongly encouraged the men to get involved in camp life and use their experience in the CCC as an advantage for future endeavors. The camp newspaper was a source of pride for enrollees and holds the key to understanding CCC daily life, camp morale, and the men’s ultimate goals.



Figure 1. This flagstone path once connected the buildings in Company 517's camp in Wyandotte Woods State Park (today O'Bannon Woods State Park).

The CCC at the National Level

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps by issuing Executive Order No. 6101 on April 5, 1933. The Emergency Conservation Work Act of March 31 directly preceded the Executive Order and stated:

That for the purpose of relieving the acute condition of widespread distress and unemployment now existing in the United States, and in order to provide for the restoration of the country's depleted natural resources and the advancement of an orderly program of useful public works . . . (the President is authorized to establish agencies to begin) employing citizens of the United States who are unemployed, in the construction, maintenance and carrying on of works of a public nature in connection with the forestation of lands belonging to the United States or to the several States. (United States Congress, 1933)

The most controversial clause in the Emergency Conservation Work Act of March 31 affirmed "that

in employing citizens for the purpose of this Act, no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed" (United States Congress, 1933). These words clearly outline an organization in which racial biases were to be erased for the good of maximum enrollment in the organization; however, "these mere words did not insure them [black enrollees] full benefits from the newly created agency" (Salmond, 1967, p. 88). In general histories of the New Deal period, including *The United States 1929–1945: Years of Crisis and Change* by Richard S. Kirkendall and *FDR: The New Deal Years* by Kenneth S. Davis, the racial issues associated with the CCC receive only a few pages of coverage. However, each author has a strikingly different view of the CCC. Kirkendall (1974) criticizes the CCC for the "discrimination against Negroes, the location of Negro camps, the agency's inability to solve the basic problems of the unemployed, and its inadequate educational programs" (p. 52). He argues that "the CCC was directed by men who had only limited aspiration" in terms of "education and race relations" (p. 52). Davis (1986), a historian of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, argues that the creators of the CCC stressed "equal access and treatment for blacks" (p. 630). He explains that the CCC was more successful in providing unemployment relief to African Americans than were other similar public works agencies. Although black enrollment numbers were never equal to those of whites and the majority of African Americans were placed in segregated CCC camps, Davis views the work of the CCC positively. He explains, "Blacks who were enabled to escape from dire misery into a healthy, secure, well-fed outdoor life, doing useful work in forest and field for pay as high as white boys received, were not disposed to be critical of CCC" (p. 630). The CCC was created with the image of equality, but the difficulties in siting black camps and unwillingness of federal agencies to force communities to cooperate led the CCC's leaders to greatly minimize the racial equality aspect of the CCC at the national level.

The CCC Experience

The CCC was a large social experiment in granting young men across the country governmental relief by providing them with meaningful work. They earned \$30 a month but were required to send \$25 home to their dependents. The men worked from 8–5, Monday through Friday, and were granted 6 days of leave between enrollment periods. Men enrolled for a period of 6 months and could then choose whether they wanted to reenlist. Because the CCC's primary goal was to provide temporary work and support as many unemployed young men as possible, enrollees could only serve up to two years. The CCC provided relief to young black men from the large Indiana cities of Evansville, Fort Wayne, Gary, and Indianapolis—

cities that could no longer adequately employ even older skilled workers. Company 517 bolstered the confidence of hundreds of young men and supported training and educational activities to help the enrollees obtain civilian jobs after discharge. Men in Company 517 were encouraged to take pride in themselves, the camp, the CCC, and New Deal ideology. Within the camp, they were exposed to competitive athletics, a large library, job training, musical organizations, and classes focused on the fine arts.

Corydon, Indiana

Projects completed in Wyandotte Woods State Park near Corydon included the restoration of a historic cabin and the planting of 60,000 trees in the Harrison County State Forest. The company also repaired trails, built the superintendent's cottage, cut roads through the forest, battled small forest fires, and repainted the Harrison County State Forest fire tower. A 60-foot-long shelter house with fireplaces on both ends of the building was one of the men's most impressive projects. Trees were cleared from the area, and today, the shelter still stands in the middle of a clearing affording beautiful views of the Ohio River. The men enjoyed many picnics in the shelter and rightly assumed that it would be one of the most popular locations in the park (see Figure 2). An unidentified artistic enrollee decorated the floor of the shelter house with an inlaid rock Indian head. A caption reading "Wyandotte Shelter" underneath the Indian head proudly showcases the enrollees' accomplishment (see Figure 3) (Company 517, 1934–1936).

The small, predominately white town of Corydon was a 15-minute drive from the 1934 site of Company 517's camp in Wyandotte Woods State Park. Large black populations in Jeffersonville, New Albany, and Louisville were less than 45 minutes away. These cities provided the men with social opportunities nearly every weekend



Figure 3. Inlaid rock Indian head on the floor of the shelter house.

they were free from work. Francis Crowdus, a veteran of 517, recalled that there was a lot of resistance by whites to all-black camps throughout the country, but many farmers in southern Indiana were happy to have their help (Quigley, 2005). Authorities in the town of Corydon made a special effort to remain on civil terms with the enrollees and invited the men to perform in special events. Company 517 was included in local athletic programs, and many enrollees entered track competitions against white students from Corydon High School and North Vernon High School. Musical groups formed in Company 517 performed at holiday events sponsored by the city Corydon. Citizens also voiced their appreciation of the work completed in the nearby state forest (Quigley, 2005). Originally, the men were located at a camp near the city of Corydon, but after complaints from residents, the company was moved inside the state park closer to their projects and 11 miles from the city. When the Ohio River flooded towns near Corydon in 1937, men from 517



Figure 2. Wyandotte Woods State Park shelter house.

were involved in rescue efforts. Many black families were sheltered in buildings operated by the state forest. Some white citizens felt that they would rather drown than be rescued by a black man. When one enrollee attempted to help a woman stranded with her cow, the woman insisted that she would rather stay behind and would prefer if he took her cow instead (Unpublished O'Bannon Woods State Park Papers). The monthly camp newspapers, however, chose to ignore racial tensions and reflected a spirit of high morale and a dedicated work ethic.

South Bend, Indiana

When the company relocated to South Bend in 1937, the men worked in closer proximity to a larger city and had to refocus their efforts to bond together in the face of hardship. The camp newspaper stressed adherence to the rules and company pride to revive the high morale of Corydon. The arrival of fresh enrollees and a new identity as a “drainage camp” left many men wishing for the life they once enjoyed in Harrison County. However, the men established themselves as major players in the local African American social scene in South Bend and strove to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded them as members of the Civilian Conservation Corps. They were advised to dress well and work hard on their projects to maintain a positive relationship with South Bend residents (Company 517, 1936–1938).

Portland, Indiana

In the fall of 1939, life changed for the men once again. Company 517 finished several ditch projects simultaneously and were informed that they would move as a unit to Portland, Indiana, in Jay County. The white citizens of Portland balked at the prospect of black men living in close proximity to their town and spoke out in the local newspaper. Upon the announcement of Company 517's arrival, citizens panicked and the editor of the Portland newspaper, *The Sun & Commercial Review*, took it upon himself to respond to the critics of 517's presence in the city:

As I see it there's no cause for alarm over the coming of these Negro boys. We wanted drainage work done and for that type of heavy labor the CCC authorities always have chosen Negroes instead of white boys—maybe because they're better ditch diggers. (EDITOR'S NOTE: A check of the camps in the 5th Corps Area, CCC, embracing Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia, shows of the 15 Negro camps in those states, only 3 do drainage work. Of the six drainage camps in Indiana, one is colored. The two colored camps at Peru and Wadesville do soil

erosion.) These colored boys are not to become permanent residents of Portland. During the few months they will be kept under strict discipline by their white officers and when they have our purposes and given us flood control they will be transferred to improve some other community just as they did South Bend before they were sent here.

The record of every boy whether white or black has been thoroughly gone into by the government before he is admitted to the CCC and if he is not thoroughly honest, decent, healthy, and reliable, he is not accepted for duty. So let's be fair to the Colored boys and get along with them just as we've always got along with the fine Negro families who have been our neighbors and friends for years. These boys are coming here to us a job of work that we couldn't afford to do ourselves and I'm sure they'll behave themselves and keep their place while they're doing it. (*Ditch Dots and Dashes*, 1939, p. 19)

In spite of the concerns of local citizens, the camp was sited and the men completed soil conservation work along with ditch and drainage labor throughout Jay County. Like in Corydon, Portland's lack of diversity forced the men to travel in order to socialize. Muncie and Fort Wayne were the closest cities with large African American communities.

Portland's reaction to the arrival of Company 517 was far from favorable. Company 517's contact with the local community was peaceful when the men were out of sight in Harrison County State Forest, but interactions became increasingly strained as the men were located closer and closer to hostile city residents. The aggression and antagonism associated with increased visibility of the black members of the Civilian Conservation Corps explains the exclusion of these young workers from promotional imagery created and distributed by the state and national offices that comprised the CCC. The mistrust of many white citizens in Portland and lack of social opportunities nearby also contributed to 517's low morale (Company 517, 1938–1940).

Racial Violence in Indiana

In a shadowy alley in Portland on the night of December 30, 1939, a single command, “Halt!” echoed through the darkness. The sudden disturbance startled a young black man named Marshall Carter who had paused to relieve himself on his way out of town. Seconds later and without provocation, shots sounded and Carter was grievously wounded. Bleeding and terrified, he staggered back to his temporary home of Camp Portland. Around 11 p.m., the man in charge of company operations,

Company Commander Frederick Taylor, administered emergency first aid to Carter in the camp hospital. The immediate reports by the camp medic were not promising. He explained the bullet had passed through the man's body, just above his heart, and estimated that he had a 50-50 chance of survival. Shortly after Carter's arrival, representatives from the local police force arrived on the scene and clarified that the gunman was a local citizen who had seen Carter on his property and believed him to be trespassing. Even in his weakened state, Carter denied these accusations. Carter was rushed to Jay County Hospital for emergency treatment at the insistence of Taylor, where the surgeon in charge could not honestly answer whether the young man would recover from his injuries. The national CCC paper, *Happy Days*, ignored the incident. Despite the cheery name, the newspaper printed multiple stories about car accidents and funerals in its January 1940 issue but ignored the story of racial violence in Indiana (Company 517, 1938-1940). The somber December issue of Company 517's paper (Figure 4), however, underscored many of the men's concerns about racial unrest. One enrollee, Edward Peters, expressed a desire for equality. When asked what he wanted to dedicate his life to, Peters replied, "My greatest ambition is to be an orator and spokesman on Negro affairs" (Company 517, 1938-1940). Poetry from this issue reflected the tragedy:

MY LIFE

I did not ask to be born
 A Negro whose ancestors
 Were slaves, whose bodies worn
 Beneath the wheels of stress.

Yet, I am what I am,
 And forever hope to be;
 'T would be less than a man,
 For these things are a part of me.

My life—I've tried to live
 The best I possibly could.
 But living my kind of life
 Was not living it good.
 For Death I died;
 Because I happened to sin;
 So now I lie
 With all forgotten men.

For eternity I slept
 Alone with the dead;
 And at night, I wept
 With a low, and fevered head.

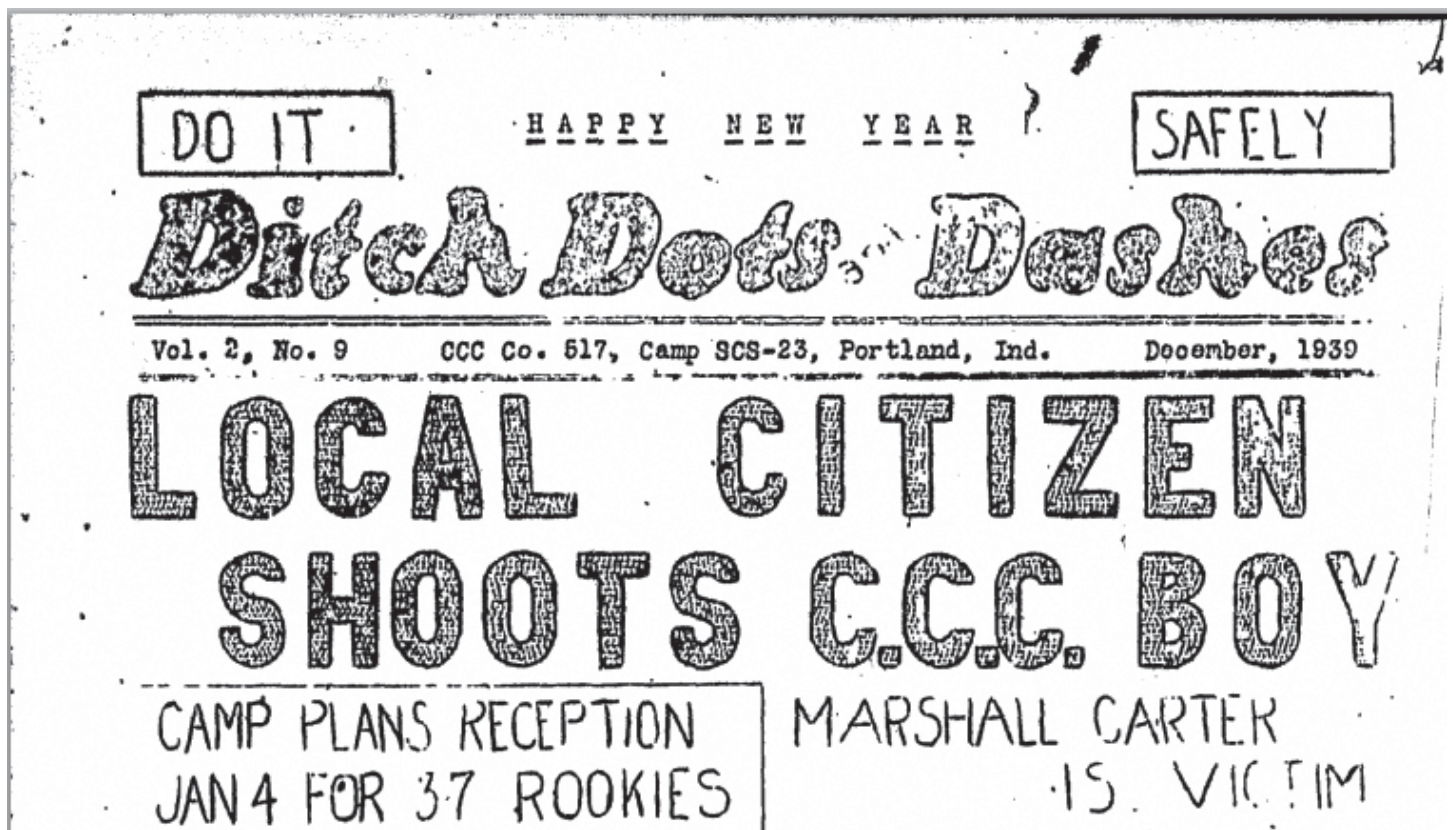


Figure 4. The December 1939 issue of *Ditch Dots and Dashes* devoted its front page to the shooting of 22-year-old enrollee Marshall Carter by a Portland citizen. Courtesy of the Center for Research Libraries Global Resources Network.

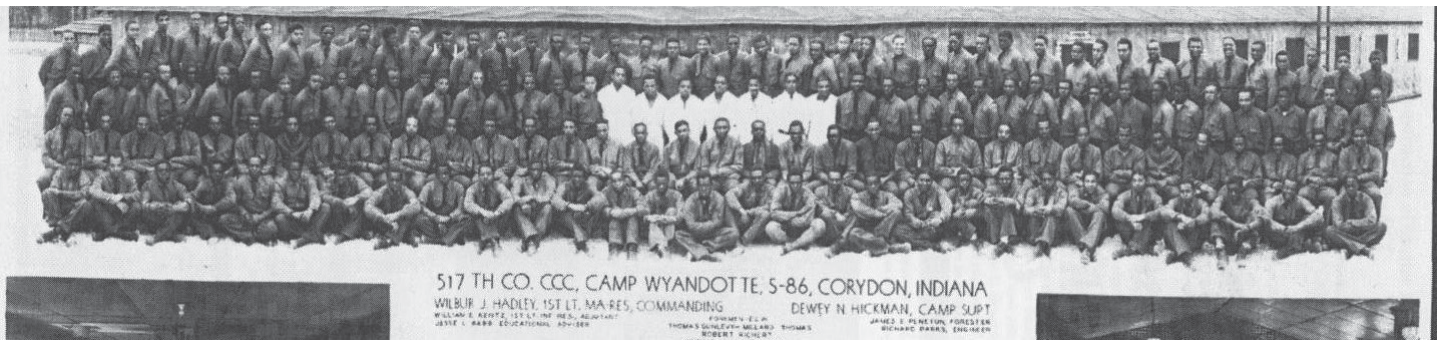


Figure 5. Company 517 men in CCC dress pose with a handful of white officers in their Corydon camp. Courtesy of O'Bannon Woods State Park.

For Life I lived;
 For Death I died;
 For Eternity I slept;
 For Freedom my race cried.

—Oswald McCoughtry (*Ditch Dots and Dashes*, 1939, p. 12)

The paper also published a haunting poem by Carter himself, commenting on the racial issues leading to the incident:

SO YOU'RE THE JUDGE

Never judge a man by the coat he's worn;
 It may be new one, or it may be old or torn.
 Don't judge a man for what he says;
 He might have had a hard life, and fate made him
 that way.

When you see a man error don't let him down;
 You may some day trod similar ground.
 Don't judge a man by the way he looks at you;
 And say harsh things about him, for it may not be
 true.
 Don't judge a man at all, for none is perfect and
 true.
 Just measure out to him what you want measured
 out to you.

—Marshall Carter (*Ditch Dots and Dashes*, 1939, p. 12)

With World War II on the horizon and a new demand for wartime labor and troops, the Civilian Conservation Corps gradually decreased operations and disbanded nationally in 1942. All emergency drainage work in Jay County was completed in 1941, and the men of Company 517 quietly scattered (Company 517, 1938–1940).

EPILOGUE

Fifty years later, Jeff Cummins, a naturalist at Harrison-Crawford State Forest, paused and stared at a photograph

hanging in the park office. The picture presented nearly 200 African American men in CCC dress posing with a handful of white officers (Figure 5). With each passing day, Cummins's curiosity grew, and eventually, he decided to investigate what became of the men who had once inhabited Camp Wyandotte. In 1993, he took the initiative to plan a public meeting in Corydon in which local citizens would help identify the men in the photograph. Corydon citizens recognized several of the enrollees at the initial meeting but most had since passed away or moved out of state. The quest to find the CCC veterans was picked up by the Associated Press and published in newspapers throughout Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. Suddenly, calls poured in. Many of the callers revealed that several of the veterans sought by Cummins were living in Indianapolis. Interviews were quickly scheduled with the Indianapolis men in an effort to record their stories. In the meetings, the men reminisced about the food from the camp kitchen, favored recreational activities, and the various public works projects. Inquiries from Cummins and others revealed that the men of Company 517 met for reunions at the Jay County Fairgrounds, the site of Camp Portland, every few years until the early 1960s. The general consensus of the veterans was that the CCC provided them with a sense of purpose and discipline that remained throughout their lives.

Over 20 of the Company 517 boys, now in their 70s and 80s, returned to the Harrison-Crawford State Forest for one final CCC reunion in 1994. They spoke proudly of their contribution to the forest around them and the sturdiness of the buildings they created. Their friendships were long-lasting, and the men still addressed one another with the same nicknames from old camp life. When discussing the CCC, the difficulties they faced as members of an all-African American group were often ignored in favor of more positive reflections. Frank "Tech" Wilson recalled his CCC experience as "the greatest part of my life" (Unpublished O'Bannon Woods State Park Papers). Before retiring, Wilson owned his

own flag pole company and felt that the strong work ethic instilled in him by his time in the CCC ensured that he was “never, ever, without a job” (Unpublished O’Bannon Woods State Park Papers). Francis Crowder became a pastor after leaving Company 517 and said, “I wish to goodness that kids today would have the opportunity, a chance like that. To take them out in the woods, fresh air, hard to get to town, stay right there. In several years we would have a good crop of men” (Unpublished O’Bannon Woods State Park Papers). Alfred Wiley, who earned a rare position of seniority in Company 517, went on to become a principal in the Evansville School District. Another enrollee, Joe Ramsey, earned a doctorate degree and taught at the secondary and college level. Norman Lee, who was an instructor for one of the most popular classes, African American history, became a department store buyer in Gary, Indiana. William S. Myers worked as a firefighter, real estate agent, and tax consultant. Myers was highly involved in the civic life of Indianapolis, Indiana.

CONCLUSION

Today, Myers’s personal papers can be viewed at the Indiana Historical Society. These men attribute their success later in life to their experience in Company 517. Myers wrote an essay titled “What I Have Got Out of the CCC Personally” regarding his experiences in the organization. He concluded “[The CCC taught me] how to live—what to live for—and where to live best” (Clark).

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