Camp Oregon Caves showcases CCC projects

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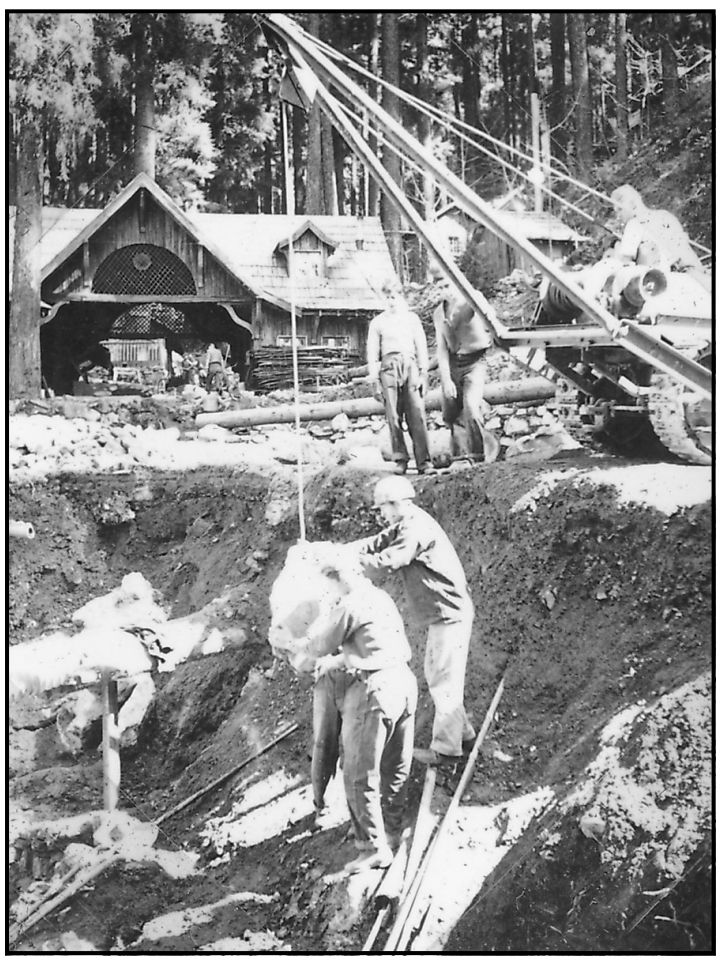
Some history stories disappear without a trace, but this isn't the case for Camp Oregon Caves.

It was a Civilian Conservation Corps camp that was on Hwy. 46 approximately 11 miles east of Cave Junction on "Caves Hwy.," the route to Oregon Caves National Monument.

For nine years, more than 200 individuals called this place home, and although the buildings were torn down long ago, we still enjoy the projects they completed. They include the Illinois Valley Airport, Grayback Campground, and the rock wall landscaping of the historic district at Oregon Caves National Monument.

Camp Oregon Caves was established in the winter of 1933-1934 as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) Act, more commonly known as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

Sometimes nicknamed Roosevelt's Tree Army, the CCC was established with the intended objective of putting the country's unemployed youth to work on critical conservation work such as soil erosion and declining timber resources.



On top of this, the program was able to complete projects that increased the economic infrastructure of many communities, including the Cave Junction area.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the CCC was the speed at which it was implemented. From Roosevelt's inauguration on March 4, 1933, to the induction of the first enrollee on April 7, only 37 days had elapsed.

Because most of recruits were on the East Coast, and the majority of camps were on the West Coast, the task of transporting them was one of the first challenges faced by the program. The U.S. Army was tasked with organizing transportation, which was accomplished by mobilizing the nation's transportation system.

The military also used its own regular and reserve officers, together with regulars of the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Navy to temporarily command camps and companies.

The military was not the only organization to initiate extraordinary efforts to meet the demands of this new program.

Leadership in the Depts. of Agriculture and Interior were responsible for planning and organizing work to be performed in every state. This is how Siskiyou National Forest and Oregon Caves National Monument became involved in the CCC camp known as Camp Oregon Caves.

By the end of 1935, there were more than 2,650 camps in operation in all states. Enrollees numbering 505,782 occupied these camps. Other categories, such as officers, supervisors, educational advisers and administrators, swelled the total to more than 600,000 persons.

The young, inexperienced recruits worked six days a week and were provided a place to live, and meals. They were paid $30 monthly, out of which a mandatory $25 allotment was sent home to each recruit's family.

In communities close to the camps, local purchases staved off failure of many small businesses. The benefits of the CCC program were felt in the economy of the cities and towns all across the nation.

There were other benefits in the camps themselves, most of which were brought about by the education programs in each. Throughout the CCC, more than 40,000 illiterates were taught to read and write, and many others earned their high school diplomas or learned trades that they could use when they left the program.

The CCC began to feel its decline in 1940 when the war in Europe was emerging as the subject of greatest concern to Roosevelt and the Congress. By the time the program closed in 1942, more than three million young men had participated.

They had a combined accomplishment of building 3,470 fire towers, constructing 97,000 miles of fire roads, devoting 4,235,000 man-days to fighting fires, and planting more than three billion trees.

The CCC also worked on development of recreational facilities in national parks, including Oregon Caves National Monument, 22 miles east of Downtown Cave Junction.

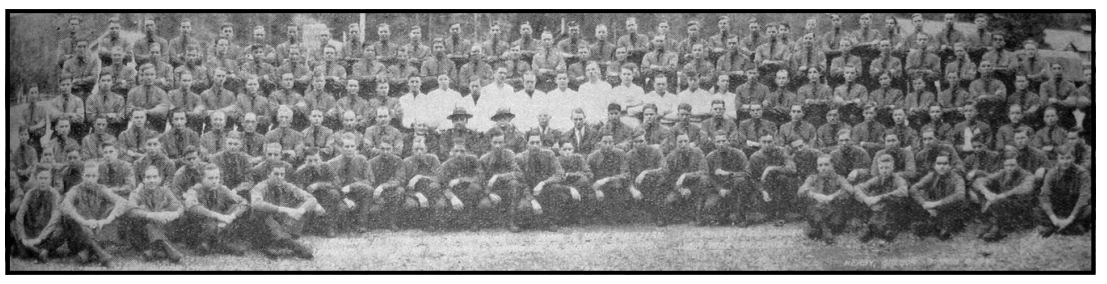
The history of Camp Oregon Caves followed in the footsteps of the rest of the CCC program nationally. Each camp was large enough to support a "company," a crew of some 200 individuals.

During the nine years Camp Oregon Caves was in operation, four companies, all of which were from out of the area, occupied this site. The first group in the camp was a crew from Nebraska, which spent the winter of 1933-1934 setting up the initial structures at the base.

The following year, Company 1634 from Illinois occupied the camp and remained there until fall 1936. It was replaced by Company 3873, a Texas group that remained for a year before being replaced by Company 5483 composed of members from Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee.

All crews stationed at Camp Oregon Caves worked at Oregon Caves during winter months, then moved to another camp at Crater Lake National Park where they worked on projects in the summer.

During its peak years, the camp had four barracks, an administration building, recreation hall, cook house, bath house, and shops and residences for supervisory staff. An athletic field provided a place for outdoor sports while facilities for indoor games were provided in the recreation hall.



Motion pictures were shown one night a week, while educational and recreational activities were scheduled other evenings.

After the camp closed in 1942, buildings were torn down, mostly out of need for building materials during World War II. Some of the buildings were moved to the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base and used for some 10 years before they were torn down and replaced with the buildings that currently occupy that site.

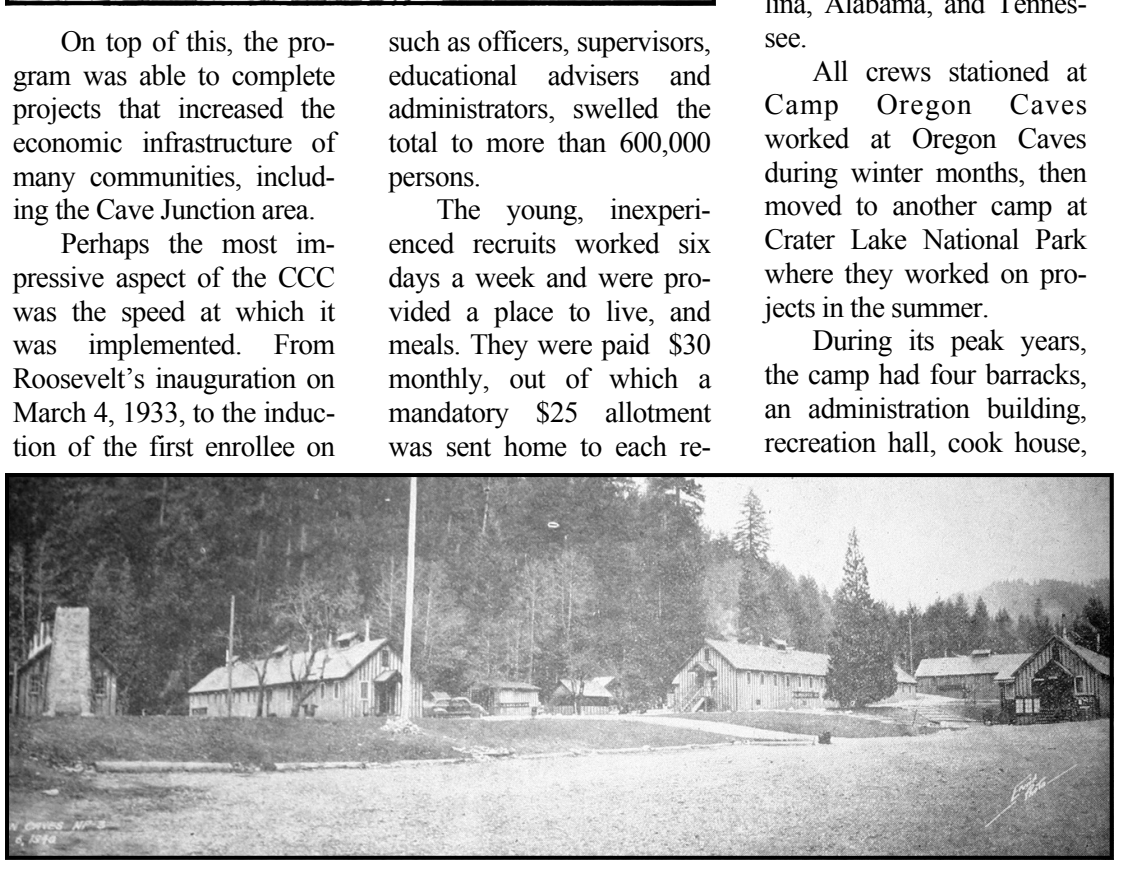
If you would like to visit historic Camp Oregon Caves, drive approximately 11.5 miles on Hwy. 46 and look on the left for the cabin-like Grayback Guard Station just before the Grayback Creek bridge.

Behind this building is the Chinquapin Group Camp, recently established for visiting schools and work crews. Behind the Chinquapin Camp, look for terraces where the recreation hall and barracks used to be located.

A few yards farther is a large meadow that may have been used the recreation field for outdoor activities.

The CCC program served a vital need at a time of national hardship, and served the nation by converting human despair into a constructive page of U.S. history.

It is a piece of Cave Junction's heritage that we can be proud to claim.



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