

*'We Can Take It!' Race and the Civilian Conservation Corps in  
Indiana, 1934-1941*

By Katie Martin

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### **'We Can Take It!' Race and the Civilian Conservation Corps in Indiana, 1934-1941**

In a shadowy alley in Portland, Indiana 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 the way out of town. Seconds later and without provocation, shots sounded in the night and Carter was grievously wounded. Bleeding and terrified, he staggered back to his temporary home of Camp Portland, a Civilian Conservation Corp camp charged with improving drainage operations and soil conservation in Jay County, Indiana. Around 11 pm, 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 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 Commander 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.<sup>1</sup>

Company 517-C (the “C” indicated that the company was “colored”) was one of eight African American Civilian Conservation Corps companies which existed in Indiana from 1933 to

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<sup>1</sup> Company 517, *Ditch Dots and Dashes* (Portland, Indiana), December 1939.

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. Company 517 was located in Corydon, South Bend, and Portland, Indiana, where the men completed recreational public works projects in rural Harrison County State Park (today O'Bannon Woods State Park) and improved the drainage systems in the cities of South Bend and Portland. Life in the segregated camp 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 allowed the men to isolate themselves from the local white community and focus on self-improvement through educational and vocational opportunities. "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 enrollee of Corydon's Company 517.<sup>2</sup> The men constantly renewed their efforts to live up to the motto of the CCC, "We Can Take It!" The 517<sup>th</sup> sought to improve their status while also conserving valuable land. Limited developments in race relations and few opportunities for black men to advance did not prevent them from carrying out the work they were hired to complete.<sup>3</sup>

The small, predominately white town of Corydon was a 15 minute drive from the 1934 camp and the 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 they were free from work. 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 that took place around holidays. Corydon citizens also voiced their appreciation of the work completed in the nearby State Forest. Francis Crowdus, a veteran of 517, recalled that there was

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<sup>2</sup> Diana Penner, *The Indianapolis Star*, October 6, 1994, newspaper clipping in William M.S. Myers Papers, Indiana Historical Society.

<sup>3</sup> Company 517, *Camp Chatter* (Corydon, Indiana), September 1935.

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. The monthly newspapers published by 517<sup>th</sup> reflect a spirit of high morale and a dedicated work ethic.<sup>4</sup>

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. In the fall of 1939, life changed for the men once again. The company 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. The camp was sited and the men completed soil conservation work along with ditch and drainage labor throughout Jay County. Like in Corydon, the lack of diversity in Portland forced the men to travel in order to socialize. Muncie and Fort Wayne were the closest cities with large African American communities. The mistrust of many white citizens in Portland and lack of social opportunities nearby contributed to 517’s low morale. The limited distractions increased interest in education and vocational classes taught within the camp. Community relations reached an all-time low when Marshall Carter was shot by a Portland citizen on his way back to camp after running a nighttime errand in town. Company 517’s contact with the local community was peaceful when the men were out of sight in Harrison County State Forest but became increasingly strained as the men were located closer and closer to hostile white city dwellers. The aggression and antagonism associated with increased

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Quigley, “African Americans and the Civilian Conservation Corps,” *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, Winter 2005: 45.

visibility of the black members of the Civilian Conservation Corps explains why these young workers were excluded from promotional imagery created and distributed by the state and national offices which comprised the CCC.

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 work...[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.

The most controversial clause in the ECW 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, and creed.”<sup>5</sup> These words clearly outline an organization in which racial biases are erased for the good of maximum enrollment in the organization. However, explains historian John Salmond, “These mere words did not insure them [black enrollees] full benefits from the newly created agency.”<sup>6</sup>

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. Kirkendall 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.” He argues that “the CCC was directed by men who had only

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<sup>5</sup> United States Congress, *An Act for the Relief of Unemployment Through the Performance of Public Work, and Other Useful Purposes* (Washington, D.C., 1933).

<sup>6</sup> John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), 88.

limited aspiration” in terms of “education and race relations.”<sup>7</sup> Davis, a celebrated historian of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, argues that the creators of the CCC stressed “equal access and treatment for blacks.” He explains that the CCC was more successful in providing unemployment relief to African Americans than were other similar public work agencies. Although black enrollment numbers were never equal those of whites and the majority of African Americans were placed in segregated CCC camps, Davis views the work of the CCC positively. Davis 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 as pay as high as white boys received, were not disposed to be critical of CCC.”<sup>8</sup> The CCC was created with the image of equality. However, the difficulties in siting black camps and unwillingness of federal agencies to force states to cooperate with black enrollment quotas led the CCC’s leaders to greatly minimize the racial equality aspect of the CCC.

In July 1935, the CCC’s national director, Robert Fechner, announced that no new African American companies would be established and black men would only be hired as vacancies became available in previously established companies.<sup>9</sup> CCC leaders were indeed disinterested in using the CCC as a tool for improving racial relations. The negativity associated with the placement of black CCC camps in white communities tarnished the organization’s popular image. “It was never the policy of CCC officials to attempt to create a nationwide system of integrated camps,” argues CCC historian, John Salmond. “Given the custom of the time, to do so would have invited trouble. Residents feared that the effect of a large body of Negroes on the social stability of their community. They anticipated great increases in

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<sup>7</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall, *The United States 1929-1945: Years of Crisis and Change* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth S. Davis, *FDR, The New Deal Years, 1933-1937: A History* (New York: Random House, 1986), 630

<sup>9</sup> John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), 99.

drunkenness and other social vices, and, in particular, they feared for the safety of white women and children.” Residents in Ligonier, Indiana, near Fort Wayne, petitioned for the removal of a black CCC company located near their home in 1934. According to a letter sent to Robert Fechner from Ligonier citizen and petitioner, Ira G. Shobe, “women were afraid to venture on the streets after nightfall.” He proclaimed that the African American CCC men frequently “go on a rampage and they do not appear to be responsible to any of the (white) officers of the camp on such occurrences.”<sup>10</sup>

The earlier issues associated with black CCC camps in this region help to explain Company 517’s difficulty adjusting to the area when they were relocated to Portland, Indiana in 1939. In a letter addressed to Robert J. Bulkley, Senator from Ohio, Robert Fechner, CCC Director, discussed the problem of siting a black CCC camp in the Midwestern Fifth Corps Area:

Whether we like it or not, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that there are communities and States that do not want and will not accept a Negro Civilian Conservation Corps company. This is particularly true in localities that have a negligible Negro population. There were so many vigorous complaints and protests that I felt it was necessary to direct Corps Area Commanders to find a location within their State of origin for all Negro Civilian Conservation Corps companies. This applies to the entire company. Even this did not solve the situation because there was great difficulty in finding a community that was willing to accept a Negro company of its own citizens. In your own State we had a good example. In the Fourth Period of Emergency Conservation Work, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp had been assigned to a work project near one of your smaller cities. We went ahead and built and equipped the camp. When a company was selected to occupy the camp it was found that the only company available was one composed of Ohio Negro enrollees. When the citizens of the community learned that a Negro company was to be sent to the camp, they absolutely refused to permit the company to occupy the camp and we were forced to completely abandon the project. I therefore adopted the policy of having our representatives consult with the Governor of the State before attempting to assign a Negro Company to any locality.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of Fechner’s orders, the men of Company 517 resided in Indiana prior to their enrollment in the organization. The public works projects constructed by African American men were ignored in materials that advertised the work of the CCC. It was typical for publications and recruitment materials to favor sharing the work completed by white camps as opposed the

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<sup>10</sup> Salmond, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Fechner, *Robert Fechner to Robert J. Bulkley*, 4 June 1936, "CCC Negro Selection" <http://newdeal.feri.org/aacc/aacc05.htm>

black camps. This technique prohibited any negative press associated with siting disputes and white community backlash from reaching the public consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

In Indiana, a total of 56 CCC camps were spread across the state. Of these 56 work camps, only eight were set aside for black enrollees despite the lopsided proportion of black men who faced poverty and economic despair in comparison to young whites. In fact, nationwide, black men accounted for only five percent of CCC enrollment in 1933 and only increased by one percent in 1934. Twice as many young black men of CCC age, 18 to 25, were unemployed in comparison to their white counterparts.<sup>13</sup> From the CCC's establishment in 1933 until its official end in 1942, 63,742 Hoosiers participated in the Civilian Conservation Corps.<sup>14</sup> Several of the largest CCC projects in Indiana include the creation of lakes at Lincoln, and Shakamak, the Picnic Shelter at Pokagon, and the Inn at Spring Mill. The CCC renewed people's interest in the Indiana outdoors and the number of paid admissions to the State Parks reflected Hoosiers' newfound environmental awareness. The number of recorded visitors increased from 45,297 in 1920 to 508,073 in 1929. The Depression brought only a slight decrease in paid attendance, followed by an increase to 770,040 in 1935 and 1,212,449 in 1940.<sup>15</sup> William B. Barnes, Sr, a CCC enrollee in Martin County, Indiana explained that camps were highly involved in the local communities and citizens were appreciative of the economic boost provided by the camps' demands for supplies. "The employment of local people created a favorable attitude not only from an employment standpoint, but it also boosted the economy of all surrounding

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<sup>12</sup> Salmond, 104.

<sup>14</sup> Quigley, 45; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 51; Lise Eichorn, "Work of a Public Nature," *Outdoor Indiana*, October 1987.

<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/metsnav3/general/index.html#mets=http%3A%2F%2Fpurl.dlib.indiana.edu%2Fiudl%2Fgeneral%2Fmets%2FVAA3736-1987-10&page=37>

<sup>15</sup> James H. Madison, *Indiana Through Tradition and Change: A History of the Hoosier State and Its People 1920-1945* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1982), 339.



communities,” Barnes said.<sup>16</sup> Elected officials understood the power of siting a CCC camp near struggling towns. State relief offices in Indiana claimed that the \$25 check was vital in managing relief loads. A spokesman for the larger cities concluded that “they have helped to get rid of the gang on the corner” and went on to say that employers expressed a preference for young men with CCC experience.”<sup>17</sup> The CCC provided relief to young black men from the large cities of Evansville, Fort Wayne, Gary, and Indianapolis 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.

The greatest record of the Company 517’s activities was chronicled in the camp newspaper. Throughout Company 517’s existence, the paper was published weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly. 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. 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 news relevant 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, recreational opportunities, Sunday worship options, and upcoming dances. The newspapers strongly encouraged the men to get involved in camp life and use their

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<sup>16</sup> Weintrust & Associates Historians, Inc., ed, *Natural Resources and the Great Depression in Martin County and South-Central Indiana: The Memoir of William B. Barnes, Sr.* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 2005), 67.

<sup>17</sup> Salmond, 111.

experience in the CCC as an advantage for future endeavors. The camp newspaper was a source of pride for enrollees.

From the paper's first publication in 1934 until the issue published on October 8, 1936, the name of the camp newspaper was *Camp Chatter*. After several improvements were made in the writing and publication process of the paper, the company offered \$1 to the man who could come up with a better title. On October 22, 1936, the name of the paper was changed to *Wyandotte Wahoo* to honor the Native Americans who inhabited the southeastern region of Indiana near present-day Corydon. "Chief Wyandotte" became a mascot of the camp and artistic enrollees took it upon themselves to draw Indian heads to decorate issues of the *Wyandotte Wahoo*. When the camp moved to South Bend, Indiana in the fall of 1937 and it became apparent that the new men were unfamiliar with the Wyandotte people, the name *Wyandotte Wahoo* was no longer appropriate. This time, a canteen book was offered as a prize to the man who could come up with a new name for the camp newspaper. By April 1938, the paper was called *Ditch Dots and Dashes*. The camp newspaper became a source of empowerment and inclusion for the young men of Company 517 by highlighting completed conservation work, African American history, educational opportunities, planned recreational activities, results of sporting events, poems, Sunday church services, and advice from CCC officers.

According to the Company Log published in several 1937 editions of the *Wyandotte Wahoo*, Company 517 was created on May 1, 1933 in Fort Knox, Kentucky, where CCC men in the Fifth Corps Area (which included Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia) received 30 days of basic training.<sup>18</sup> There were thirty-five men in the original Company but on May 3, 177 more enrollees were assigned to 517 which brought the total number of men to 212. By May 23, all men who hailed from other states were assigned to separate companies and replaced with men

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<sup>18</sup> Quigley, 45.

from Indiana. On May 26, under Captain Schug, a diverse company of both black and white men was transferred from Fort Knox to Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis. Fort Harrison was the operational headquarters for the CCC in Indiana. The enrollees were assigned to police the grounds at Fort Harrison for five days. Captain Evans replaced Captain Schug in June and a week later the Company moved to Brown County State Park. From June 3 to July 13, 1933, the company worked under the supervision of the State Forester. The men built roads, planted trees, and completed erosion work in the State Park. On July 13, the diverse company relocated to Jackson County near Brownstown, Indiana where the enrollees completed projects similar to those of Brown County under the supervision of Mr. Foley, Park Superintendent. Meanwhile the work on the construction of camp buildings progressed under the direction of Captain Evans. There was in reality little time for anything other than work but Company 517 managed to have a baseball team and, “despite the mud,” basketball.<sup>19</sup>

At the start of 1934, leaders at Fort Harrison outlined plans for the completion of necessary conservation work in Harrison County State Forest. On May 19, CCC leaders in Indianapolis ordered the segregation of Company 517 and the 84 white enrollees were immediately transferred to Company 513 in Henryville, Indiana. The remaining black enrollees were relocated to Corydon, Indiana, Camp S-54 (which referred to State Forest, project number 54) which was 11 miles from the projects in the Harrison County State Forest. Camp S-54 was previously occupied by Company 1556, composed primarily of World War I veterans. These men were so popular with the local Corydon residents that protests occurred when the men were moved to a new camp in the Jackson State Forest in Brownstown, Indiana. Like most

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<sup>19</sup> Company 517, *Wyandotte Wahoo* (Corydon, Indiana), April 1937; *Camp Chatter*, July 1934.

predominately white towns, Corydon residents originally resisted the siting of the black CCC camp.<sup>20</sup>

Thirty-five enrollees, ten of whom were white transfers to the Henryville camp, and 35 to 40 trucks moved Company 517's equipment to Camp S-54 on May 27, 1934. After the relocation, Camp Commander, Lieutenant Warrick, headed to Fort Knox for new recruits and came back with 203 recently enrolled African American men.<sup>21</sup> Most of the enrollees were from Evansville, Indianapolis, and Muncie. Under Captain Hayward, the enrollees moved into the Corydon camp and picked up where the veterans had left off. The initial projects included the building of truck trails, hiking trails, and assisting with the upkeep of county roads.<sup>22</sup> In the words of *Camp Chatter* editor and artist James Johnson, "Many of us came to Company 517 with our minds filled with rumors, vague expectations, and fond hopes; but by now, after having been in permanent camp a week, all these cobwebs of doubt and rumor should have been swept away and floors of reality built to take the place of the former dreams and hallucinations."<sup>23</sup>

In March 1934, the Company Commanders and Sector Commanders met at the Henryville camp and discussed the possibility of adding an Educational Adviser to the camp personnel. A few days later, Paul E. Williams was appointed Educational Adviser to Company 517 and remained with the black enrollees when the Company moved to Corydon in May. From its onset, the educational program of Company 517 was a source of pride and opportunity. Most of the men graduated from high school prior to their enrollment and a few had even attended college. The men were highly encouraged to continue their education by taking part in the variety of classes offered through the camp's early educational program. Class options included

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<sup>20</sup>*Camp Chatter*, July 1934; Company 517, *Wyandotte Wahoo* (Corydon, Indiana), April 1937; Quigley, 45; *Wyandotte Wahoo*, May 1937.

<sup>21</sup>*Camp Chatter*, July 1934.

<sup>22</sup>Quigley, 45; *Wyandotte Wahoo*, April 1937.

<sup>23</sup> *Camp Chatter*, June 1934.

Forestry, Art, French, First Aid, Auto Mechanics, Typewriting, English, French, and Photography. The classes were well-attended. In June 1934, more than 86 enrollees showed up to the initial meeting of the Forestry class which took place on Monday evenings.<sup>24</sup>

*Camp Chatter* was established the second week after Williams' arrival and was published weekly by the camp's Art and Journalism classes. Under his mentorship, the paper won second place in the Fifth Corps Area through a contest sponsored by the national CCC paper, *Happy Days*, in early 1934. By July, the paper itself was considered a point of pride for enrollees. The editor proclaimed "[*Camp Chatter*] is a pioneer camp paper of the state."<sup>25</sup> Early editions of the paper averaged around six pages. Illustrations relevant to life in a CCC camp graced the first page of the paper followed by longer articles which featured general camp news, the education program, and Sunday religious services. Smaller illustrations, inside jokes, and poems were interspersed throughout the rest of the early editions of *Camp Chatter*. Brief updates on enrollees who were hospitalized or participating in local athletic events were placed in the last two pages. Subscriptions to *Camp Chatter*, the earliest edition of Camp 517's paper, cost the enrollee 2 cents per copy or 7 cents per month out of the \$5 that the men were allowed to keep for themselves. At the paper's height, one thousand copies of *Camp Chatter* were published each month and many excerpts from the Company paper were included in the local Corydon papers. The editor urged the men to take ownership of their newspaper:

*Camp Chatter*, the camp paper, is made of incidents which we have participated in and jokes and pranks which we have enjoyed. The "Dirt From Around the Barracks" is about us and so is the other news from the front page to the back about us. Do yourself the favor of reading your own paper from cover to cover.

Company 517's newspaper shared traits common with many other newspapers from African American CCC camps. One common theme was to express gratitude for leaders like President

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<sup>24</sup> *Camp Chatter*, June 1934.

<sup>25</sup> *Camp Chatter*, July 1935.

Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and CCC organizers. There was a greater urgency manifested in these papers to improve themselves through education, develop a strict work ethic, and pay close attention to personal conduct, health, and general appearance.<sup>26</sup>

The tone of *Camp Chatter* was positive and upbeat during the Company's stay in Corydon. The men engaged in seemingly progressive community relations and stressed self-improvement. The men were proud of their camp and participated in friendly inter-barrack competitions to create bonds between the men outside of work. The paper often reported point of pride, for instance, "no other company in Indiana has any odds on Company 517, Corydon, Indiana" in terms of road construction. When heavy rainfalls caused large sections of earth to wash away, leaving ditches at the bottom of the hills, Company 517 created over 600 small dams in the span of two weeks. The camp's segregated state also allowed the men to discuss African American culture and recognize the accomplishments of black men contemporarily and historically. As an extension of the educational program, *Camp Chatter* encouraged enrollees to consider "what you are going to be and do when your CCC days are over."<sup>27</sup> Experiences in Company 517 built enrollees' confidence and fostered an environment of optimism when thinking about the future. The camp newspaper frequently published words of encouragement that were meant to inspire participation in camp activities. One *Camp Chatter* journalist wrote, "New Deal or no New Deal – a new day will dawn and if we partake correctly of that day, we will owe to ourselves the victory."<sup>28</sup>

There was a great deal of interaction between the men of 517 and the community. The Camp Superintendent, Mr. Heathman, reported that he received several compliments from the

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<sup>26</sup>Alfred Emile Cornebise, *The CCC Chronicles: Camp Newspapers of the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), 167.

<sup>27</sup> *Camp Chatter*, July 1934.

<sup>28</sup> *Camp Chatter*, October 1935.

locals regarding the behavior of Company 517. “The boys of our company have maintained a moral standard which is highly esteemed by the citizens of Corydon. The compliments received were made known by Camp Superintendent.”<sup>29</sup> Company 517 was also included in local athletic programs; many enrollees entered track competitions against white Corydon High School and North Vernon High School students. One theory attributes Corydon’s spirit of inclusion to citizens’ belief that it was fair for the 18-to-25-year-old men to compete against high school students. Racial prejudices validated the inferiority of these young black men. Company 517’s basketball team also practiced and played games in the Corydon High School gym.<sup>30</sup> The men were so successful that they produced a state championship basketball team in 1934.<sup>31</sup> The camp’s athletics program created an atmosphere of teamwork and entertained the men on their time off. They competed against each other in inter-barrack competitions but also traveled to other CCC camps within their District to play basketball and softball.

The personnel of Company 517 experienced turnover once more in the summer of 1934. On August, 15, 1934, Lieutenant Hadley joined the army personnel and short time later, took over the duties of Lieutenant Warrick who was transferred to another camp. Typical camp life was briefly disrupted when plans were formulated to create a new camp within the Harrison County State Forest in order to be closer to their projects and to further distance the camp from the hostile white community.<sup>32</sup> Actual work on Camp S-86 began on October 15 and the campsite was ready for occupancy on December 19. The campsite was described as “a veritable sea of mud” upon arrival but the enrollees and officers were determined to make the area habitable. The men took time after work hours and during vacations to grade and fill in the site.

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<sup>29</sup> *Camp Chatter*, August 1934.

<sup>30</sup> *Camp Chatter*, September 1934.

<sup>31</sup> *Camp Chatter*, July 1934.

<sup>32</sup> *Group Camp Files*. Courtesy of Rita Reckner,

After completing these general improvements, the men took it upon themselves to “beautify” the area. The camp was located on a scenic ridge one mile from the forest boundary. A small detail of men, selected, cut, and laid over 3,500 feet of native rock wall. Drains were put in and rock and gravel was spread on the Company street for practical and decorative purposes (Fig, 1, 2, and 3).<sup>33</sup>



Figure 1. Source: “Camp View.” *Group Camp Files*. Courtesy of Rita Reckner, O’Bannon Woods State Park, 2014.



Figure 2. Source: “Camp Wyandotte Today – Flagstone Path.” Author photograph, O’Bannon Woods State Park, 2014.



Figure 3. Source: “Camp Wyandotte.” *Group Camp Files*. Courtesy of Rita Reckner, O’Bannon Woods State Park, 2014.

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<sup>33</sup> *Wyandotte Wahoo*, May 1937.



New projects included the restoration of a historic cabin that was 104 years old in 1935 located in the Harrison County State Forest after arrival in the new camp. A detail of 20 men planted 4,000 locust trees in one day. Overall, it is estimated that the CCC planted 60,000 total trees in the Harrison County Forest. The company repaired trails, built the superintendent's cottage, cut roads through the forest, battled small forest fires, and repainted the Harrison County State Fire Tower. One of the enrollees' most prized projects was the construction of a 60-foot long Shelter House with fireplaces on both ends of the building. 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 (Fig.4). An unknown 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 (Fig. 5).<sup>34</sup>



Figure 4. "Shelterhouse #2." Author photograph, O'Bannon Woods State Park, 2014

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<sup>34</sup> *Camp Chatter*, August 1935; *Camp Chatter*, November 1935; *Camp Chatter*, February 1936; *Camp Chatter*, September 1936; *Camp Chatter*, April 1936; *Group Camp Files*. Courtesy of Rita Reckner,



Figure 5. "Wyandotte Shelter Indian Head." Author Photograph, O'Bannon Woods State Park, 2014

The activities of Company 517 and the other seven African American Companies in Indiana were often hidden from the popular, *Outdoor Indiana*, a monthly magazine published by the Indiana Department of Conservation and the Indiana Division of Agriculture. The impressive work projects completed in Harrison County State Forest and Wyandotte Woods State Park (Wyandotte Woods State Recreation Area and later O'Bannon Woods State Park) were ignored in favor of projects completed by white Companies at McCormick's Creek State Park, Lincoln State Park, and Brown County State Park. The magazine publicized the work of the CCC in State Parks and State Forests in order to increase visitation to the greatly improved State Park system. There are few references to any of the recreational improvements installed by Company 517. African American enrollees and their accomplishments are absent from such articles as: "Indiana State Parks Developed by CCC" and "State Park Visitors Will Find Many New Features and Conveniences."<sup>35</sup>

The segregated camp allowed the young men to bolster their own racial identity. *Camp Chatter* communicated interesting trivia in a column entitled, "Did You Know That" and

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<sup>35</sup> "Civilian Conservation Corps Begins Eighth Period of Work in Indiana," *Outdoor Indiana*, December 1936. <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/metsnav3/general/index.html#mets=http%3A%2F%2Fpurl.dlib.indiana.edu%2Fiudl%2Fgeneral%2Fmets%2FVAA3736-1936-12&page=30>; "Indiana State Parks Developed by CCC," *Outdoor Indiana*, February 1936. <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/metsnav3/general/index.html#mets=http%3A%2F%2Fpurl.dlib.indiana.edu%2Fiudl%2Fgeneral%2Fmets%2FVAA3736-1936-02&page=22>; "State Park Visitors Will Find Many New Features and Conveniences," *Outdoor Indiana*, March 1935. <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/metsnav3/general/index.html#mets=http%3A%2F%2Fpurl.dlib.indiana.edu%2Fiudl%2Fgeneral%2Fmets%2FVAA3736-1935-03&page=20>

included interesting landmarks in African and African American history as well as specific points of progress. One such piece of trivia alerted the men to the fact that “Henry VIII, King of England had Negro trumpeters in his regiments. Until 1851, nearly all of the percussion instruments, drums and cymbals, in the regimental bands of the British Isles were played by Negroes.”<sup>36</sup> Poems written by enrollees express their frustration with race relations in the United States. An uncredited poem entitled “An Ode to the Negro” appears in the July 1935 edition of *Camp Chatter*:

From unfathomable depths  
He has come thus far  
Along life’s rough road.  
Yet, is he striving untiringly toward  
          success  
That goal which looms tremendously be-  
          fore him.

Seemingly impenetrable walls of dissent  
          sion  
Invulnerable fortresses of opposition  
Are facing cataclysmic destruction  
As ultimatum of his perseverance

Prejudice, hate, segregation  
Are being rendered imperceptible  
By the unrivaled persistency  
Of this black man.

Progress in altruism; dignity, education,  
          and power  
Will continue to produce lucrative re-  
          sults  
To that humble, God-fearing being,  
The Negro.<sup>37</sup>

Not until 1936 were a few African Americans promoted to the rank of officer and supervisor within CCC camps

Early in January 1937, severe flooding caused by the steadily rising Ohio River threatened the nearby towns of Jeffersonville, English, and Leavenworth. Black families from

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<sup>36</sup> *Camp Chatter*, September 1935.

<sup>37</sup> *Camp Chatter*, July 1935.

Jeffersonville and New Albany were temporarily sheltered in one of the Forestry Service's buildings. Company 517 sent 60 men under the supervision of Lt. Hadley to battle the worst flood in the history of these towns. The men were stranded in Jeffersonville but continued to assist those people affected by the flood. Several enrollees distinguished themselves by their service in rescue work and were highly celebrated by Company 517 upon their return to camp. In later editions of the camp newspaper, these men are recognized as heroes and always mentioned in articles dedicated to the history of 517. Not all members of the community were happy to be saved by black men. Enrollee Francis Crowdus recalled at the 1994 Company 517 reunion that when he was attempting to help an English woman and her cow evacuate when she said, "I don't want to go with you niggers, take the cow." Crowdus said they left both the cow and the woman behind.<sup>38</sup> The Company overlooked any negative public reactions and on April 4, 1937, Company 517 excitedly opened the camp to the public to join other CCC companies in celebrating the fourth anniversary of the establishment of the CCC.<sup>39</sup>

In May 1937, Lieutenant W. J. Hadley, who first became an officer in the Company in August 1934, left the service. Lt. Hadley (Fig. 7) was with the Company longer than any member of the supervisory officers. The Company was rated Superior eight consecutive months under his guidance. One inspection was performed by the head of the forest camps in Indiana and a representative from the office of the state government who praised "the work of the Company and...the fine spirit of cooperation shown in this Company."<sup>40</sup> A final point of pride for the men of 517 was the visible impact CCC life had on the young men. The average enrollee

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<sup>38</sup>Wyandotte Wahoo, August 1937; *Group Camp Files*. Courtesy of Rita Reckner.

<sup>39</sup>Wyandotte Wahoo, April 1937.

<sup>40</sup>Wyandotte Wahoo, May 1937.

in this company gained eight pounds due to proper nutrition from meals consumed in the camp's mess hall and muscle amassed through the physical labor of constructing public works projects.<sup>41</sup>



Figure 7. Source: "Lieutenant Hadley." *Group Camp Files*, Courtesy of Rita Reckner, O'Bannon Woods State Park, 2014.

Francis Crowdus summed up his experience in the Corydon camp by saying, "there was a sense of high expectation. We worked hard and we were expected to do it right. We used our muscles...we built barracks, dams, fought forest fires, reclaimed streams, and planted forests. Even though the CCC was one of President Roosevelt's job programs, I never felt I was on welfare."<sup>42</sup>

In the fall of 1937, Company 517 was transferred from the State Park within the Harrison County State Forest to Camp D-3, a drainage camp administered by the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering, in South Bend, Indiana. This camp was established in August 1935 as one of eight drainage camps and was previously occupied by the white Company 1591. Major projects included clearing and excavating open ditches, leveling spoil banks, cleaning and relaying tile lines, and building and repairing structures such as headwalls, farm bridges, and road culverts.<sup>43</sup>

Although the men left Harrison County with one of the best records in the state in terms of

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<sup>41</sup> *Wyandotte Wahoo*, September 1937.

<sup>42</sup> Quigley, 47.

<sup>43</sup> CCC Legacy, "CCC Camps Indiana," [http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC\\_Camps\\_Indiana.html](http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC_Camps_Indiana.html); *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, April 1938.

discipline and high morale, the men's optimism lagged as they attempted to adjust to their new environment. The relationship with the local city was also not as civil as the Company's previous connection with Corydon. *Wyandotte Wahoo* adopted a more serious tone when addressing men's reputation in South Bend. One journalist ominously warned, "When in South Bend or any other town, see that your conduct is above reproach, lest you bring dishonor to your temporary home – Company 517. You are being watched."<sup>44</sup>

As the Company settled into the Northern Sector, morale improved and the men looked to defend the "record number of Superior ratings" previously earned in Harrison County.<sup>45</sup> In May 1938, the layout of the paper improved and the name changed to *Ditch Dots and Dashes*. The May edition of the Company paper "took its place among the four star mimeograph newspapers of the Civilian Conservation Corps" rated by the national CCC newspaper.<sup>46</sup> After the initial renovation work was completed around camp, the men believed that Company 517 would reestablish itself "as one of Indiana's superior camps."

In May 1939, rumors regarding a possible camp relocation spread through the camp. *Ditch Dots and Dashes* staff conducted interviews with personnel who disclosed that all work in South Bend and St. Joseph County was expected to be completed by July 1. A camp journalist reported that the Company would move as a unit to Portland, Indiana between July 10 and 15. When the relocation was confirmed, Louis B. Samms, Bureau of Agricultural Engineering foreman, visited the future campsite at Portland and recounted:

The campsite lays at the north-east edge of Portland at the west boundary of the Jay County fair ground, in what for years has been a pasture...The camp will be located within the city limits and is only about five blocks from the center of town. The population of Portland, Indiana is given as 5613. Muncie, Indiana, about 30 miles away, is the center of the colored population with Richmond being nearby.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Wyandotte Wahoo*, November 1937.

<sup>45</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, April 1938.

<sup>46</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, June 1938.

<sup>47</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, May 1939.

The considerable distance between the camp and the nearest black community upset many enrollees. The men left South Bend on July 17 with a rating of “Superior” and many honors to the camp’s name.

Portland’s reaction to the arrival of Company 517 was far from favorable. 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:

Never have I seen a community so stunned as Portland appeared to be last evening after your paper appeared with the announcement that a Negro company had been assigned to the new CCC camp here. Amazement seemed to be followed by indignation and everywhere I went groups of persons were heatedly discussing the news and voicing the protests against the coming of 200 Negro boys to work for us this summer.

Personally, I can’t understand this public attitude. When we asked the government to establish a CCC Camp here we had but one thing in view. That was the rescue of Portland from the floods that have been its costly curse for the 103 years since the city’s founders made the mistake of laying out the town in a swamp instead of on the high ground where College Corner and Liber now stand. Our plea was granted by the government and the camp is being constructed and now, just because the workers assigned to carry out our program are Negro boys, the city is in a furor that would make a stranger think we were about to have a visitation of the black plague or be invaded by a foreign foe.

More than a little of the complaining against the order bringing a Negro company here is coming from young ladies of the city. At the Hollywood and Valentines’s last night I heard many of them lamenting the dashing of their hopes that the camp would bring 200 more or less eligible white boys here to the summer. The girls’ regret was not shared by their boy friends who had dreaded the “competition” a white camp would have created.

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 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>*Ditch Dots and Dashes*, August 1939.

Similar misgivings from white communities throughout the state did not prevent the enrollment of 120 more African American men in the Indiana CCC. Sixty more men, primarily from South Bend and Gary, joined the 517<sup>th</sup> in Portland in October 1939.<sup>49</sup>

As the Company settled into life at Camp Portland, relations with the community appeared to improve. Frank Wilson, an enrollee who was promoted to Kitchen Duty and allowed to stay with the Company from 1934 until it disbanded in 1941, later reflected, “I think we had the best reception of all in Portland.”<sup>50</sup> The public was invited to inspect the men’s work at a camp dedication ceremony in August and Mayor J.L. Hammit, along with other Portland civic leaders, participated in the program. Despite the success of the dedication program, the men had no place to socialize in Portland. Instead, they established themselves in the black communities of Muncie and Fort Wayne with recreational trips each Saturday and Sunday afternoon.<sup>51</sup>

By the fall of 1939, life in Camp Portland was settling into a comfortable routine. *Ditch Dots and Dashes* happily reported, “98 percent of the men who were homesick and heartsick upon their arrival in Portland are now happy as a bug in rug.”<sup>52</sup> Everything changed on the night of December 30, 1939 when 22-year-old enrollee Marshall Carter who was known as the camp comedian and the mechanic’s helper was shot in a Portland alleyway on his way out of town. There are no records which indicate the citizen who aimed to kill the young African American man was ever charged or that the incident received notice in Portland or the other cities frequented by the enrollees. *Ditch Dots and Dashes* devoted the front page of their December issue to the story (Fig. 10).

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<sup>49</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, August 1939; *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, December 1939.

<sup>50</sup> “A Remembrance of the CCC,” *Commercial Review*, October 7, 1994  
<http://www.museumofthesoldier.com/cccr.htm>

<sup>51</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, August 1939.

<sup>52</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, September 1939.



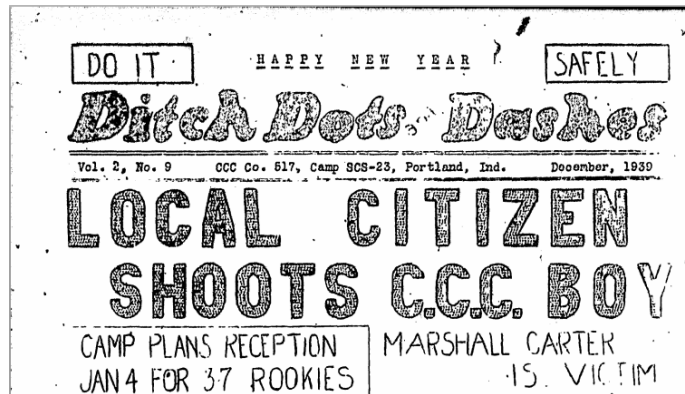


Figure 8. Source: Company 517, *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, (Portland, Indiana), December 1939.

The somber December issue underscored many of the men's feeling of 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."<sup>53</sup> Poetry from this issue reflected the tragedy:

MY LIFE

I did not ask to be born  
 A Negro whose ancestors  
 Were slaves, whose bodies warn  
 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.

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

<sup>53</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, December 1939.

- Oswald McCoughtry '39

The paper also published a haunting poem by Carter himself relating to 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 '39<sup>54</sup>

Marshall Carter was hospitalized at the Jay County Hospital in Portland and later transferred to the Station Hospital, Ft. Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis where he made an uneventful recovery. No permanent disability resulted from this injury and he was discharged from the CCC in January 1939.<sup>55</sup>

Even after experiencing targeted violence, Camp Portland invited the public to an open house celebrating the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CCC in April 1940. A dance was held in the camp's recreation hall and black women from Richmond and Muncie, "the centers most frequented by enrollees," arrived in private buses paid for by the Company.<sup>56</sup> This event marked one of the last social gatherings sponsored by Company 517. Thirty-four men left camp in February and March 1940 leaving only 150 total men enrolled at Camp Portland. Many former enrollees found work in the steel mills of Gary and the camp desertion rate peaked in December as men left the CCC for higher paying jobs. With World War II on the horizon and a new demand for wartime labor

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<sup>54</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, December 1939.

<sup>55</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, February 1940.

<sup>56</sup> *Ditch Dots and Dashes*, March 1940.

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.<sup>57</sup>

Fifty years later, Jeff Cummins, a naturalist at Harrison County 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 (Fig. 9). With each passing day, Cummins' 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 (Fig. 10). The general consensus of the veterans was that the CCC provided them with a sense of purpose and discipline which remained throughout their lives.

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<sup>57</sup> Quigley, 47.

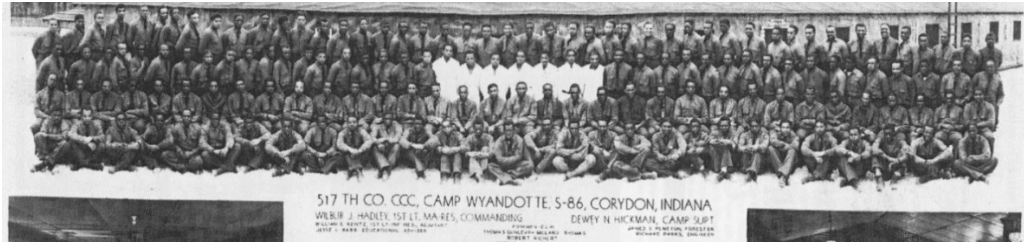


Figure 9. Source: "Company 517" *Group Camp Files*, Courtesy of Rita Reckner, O'Bannon Woods State Park, 2014.



Figure 10. "10<sup>th</sup> Annual CCC Reunion Company 517." *Museum of the Soldier*, <http://www.museumofthesoldier.com/1960%20Reunion.jpg>

Over 20 of the Company 517 boys, now in their 70s and 80s, returned to the Harrison County 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 other with the same nicknames from old camp life. When discussing life in 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." Before retiring, Frank Wilson owned his own flag pole company and felt that the strong work ethic instilled in him by his time in the CCC insured that he was "never, ever, without a job."<sup>58</sup> Francis Crowdus became a pastor after leaving the Company 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." Alfred Wiley, who earned a rare position of seniority in 517, went on to become a principal in

<sup>58</sup> *Group Camp Files*. Courtesy of Rita Reckner.

the Evansville School District. The Wyandotte sign painter, Lucien Garner, became a professional artist and exhibited works at the World's Fair. 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. Today, his 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."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Benjamin Clark, "African Americans in Indiana's Civilian Conservation Corps," *Indiana State Parks and Reservoirs* [http://www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/files/sp-CCC517\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.in.gov/dnr/parklake/files/sp-CCC517_brochure.pdf)

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