

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: The Great Depression and the CCC in Elmhurst

The Great Depression affected almost every nation on the globe in the 1930s, and Elmhurst was not untouched by the economic disaster. The city had enjoyed a period of booming growth in the 1920s. With the downturn in economic fortunes, residential development stalled. Building contractors, electricians, carpenters, and plumbers were out of work as demand for their services dried up. Area farmers, which still comprised a sizeable portion of the local population, struggled to make ends meet. Community chests ran dry and unemployment was on the rise—a scene that repeated itself in municipalities across the country.



Camp Elmhurst CCC workers, M2006.4.11

The City of Elmhurst took several measures at the local level attempting to alleviate the stresses of the Depression, including the establishment of the Elmhurst Welfare Relief Committee and giving assistance to the independent Elmhurst Welfare Association. City Council reduced the salary of all city employees and also applied and received grant money from the several New Deal federal programs to maintain infrastructure throughout the decade. DuPage County officials welcomed federal assistance as well, leading to the establishment of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Elmhurst.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) is regarded as one of the most successful New Deal programs to emerge from the flurry of federal aid projects during the Depression. Established in 1933 to provide employment to unmarried men under the age of 25, the CCC undertook conservation work, infrastructure improvement, and landscape beautification projects. For a six-month term, enlistees were given \$30 a month with the expectation that \$25 of that sum would be sent home directly to their



CCC Camp Elmhurst, 1934, M2006.4.14

dependent families. The aim of the program was to provide labor to the unemployed, and there was plenty to go around for those that enlisted in the CCC.

In December 1933, Elmhurst welcomed CCC company 1672. The company consisted of more than 200 army veterans, and they quickly set to work building a camp near North Avenue and Villa Avenue to the northwest of town. However, their work orders were delayed, and in May of the following year the company was dispatched to Rockford. Camp Elmhurst was temporarily vacant until the end of that summer.

CCC Company 2602, under the command of Captain Leland S. Powers, arrived at Camp Elmhurst on August 10, 1934 with the assigned goal of improving the new Route 54 parkway. Located on Villa Avenue just south of North Avenue, the company of more than 200 men was assigned to a project that entailed improvements to the route's right of way south of Roosevelt Road. This included tree planting, bridge building, and general landscaping to beautify the recently constructed highway. It was also the job of corpsmen to build the camp itself, which was comprised of about a dozen buildings that included military-style barracks, administrative offices, a recreation building, and a mess hall.

Most of the men of Camp Elmhurst were Chicago area locals, but the company was comprised of enlistees from all over the Midwest. To make the best of their new home, the company hosted several community dances and took part in local parades. Camp Elmhurst hosted an open house in April 1935, which demonstrated both how a CCC camp operated and the importance of the work that was being conducted by the program.

After a year of work on the Route 54 parkway project, Camp Elmhurst was abruptly closed without reason in August 1935. Its company was divided and reassigned to camps in Melrose Park and Peoria, and the parkway project was eventually delegated to other DuPage County camps in St. Charles and Fullersburg Woods. The latter camp was also tasked with conducting conservation work on the old Graue Mill, which still stands today as a museum in Oak Brook. While Camp Elmhurst was hastily disassembled, the results of the CCC work remain in the trees that still stand to this day along Route 83.

The program as whole was brought to a close in 1942 due to the escalating war effort, but "Roosevelt's Tree Army," as the CCC was called, left a legacy of conservation that can still be seen throughout the United States.

By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated October 2021