

The Great Depression and the Civilian Conservation Corps

By Barbara Glakas

The most serious economic crisis in United States history was the Great Depression of the 1930s. According to Nan Netherton, et al., in her book the book, "Fairfax County, Virginia, A History," it was estimated that "of the 5,000 heads of families in Fairfax [County], 1,000 were out of work." Families went hungry. Patricia Pearson noted in her book, "Fighting for the Forest," that ninety percent of the children in Virginia schools were malnourished. Unemployment rose rapidly, farm prices plummeted and the state government cut spending. The financial pinch of the Great Depression affected the town of Herndon as well.

Some long-time Herndon residents recall the effects of the Depression. One resident recalled that her mother had to frequently take the train to Washington, D.C., to sell her embroidery in a dime store in order to make extra cash. Another resident recalled that her family was constantly short of clothing. Even when she got married in 1941 she was still making clothing for her family out of feed sacks. Mr. Benjamin McGuire, who was a grocery merchant in downtown Herndon at the corner of Elden and Spring Streets, lost his store.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933 as a confident and energetic leader, full of hope, and promising a New Deal for America in order to get people back work. In his first inauguration speech he said:

"The nation asks for action, and action now. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work... We must act, and act quickly."

And that he did. Within a few days he was meeting with his cabinet members and department heads to talk about programs he wanted to propose to Congress. One of those programs was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). A conservationist himself, Roosevelt grew up appreciating the outdoors on his family's 600-acre estate in Hyde Park, New York -- swimming, sailing, hiking and sledding. He loved birds and he learned to appreciate trees. He and his family members planted 400,000 trees over the years.

It was Roosevelt's intent to recruit 500,000 young men to put them to work around the country on conservation projects. The men who were to be recruited had to be unemployed, unmarried and between the ages of 18 and 25. Roosevelt knew that his CCC program would not only give the men a chance to earn money, but would also lift up their spirits and give them a sense of self-worth, while also creating and repairing much-needed national parks.

Back in Herndon, the Wilson family was one of many who fell on hardship as a result of the Depression. Thomas and Lutie Wilson lived in Herndon in a small house on the corner of Dranesville Road and 3rd Street. They had eight children. A wage earner and laborer for most of his life, by 1930 Thomas was a foreman for the Washington and Old Dominion Railway. As a

railroad man he collected milk delivered by local dairy farmers and shipped it to Washington, D.C., where it would be processed. But as the Depression hit, people could no longer afford to buy milk or other farm goods that the train carried.

Stockholders for the Washington and Old Dominion Railway lost a significant amount of money when the stock market crashed in 1929. In 1932 they refused to meet any of their further deficits and the railway went into receivership. One of their efforts to reduce expenses was to reduce the number of employees. Remaining employees were also asked to contribute a part of their pay. Thomas Wilson eventually lost his job.

In the early 1930s local newspapers reported that “Depression parties” were being held throughout the region, including in Herndon. In addition to lifting peoples’ morale, presumably these parties also aided low-income families during the difficult financial times of the Depression. One 1932 *Washington Post* article announcement requested that people bring donations for the Social Service League at a Depression party occurring in Silver Spring, Maryland. A 1934 *Herndon Observer* newspaper article announced that a Depression party was being planned by the Ladies Aid Society of the Herndon Baptist Church. Mrs. Charles Wilson, Thomas Wilson’s daughter-in-law, was the chairperson. Various committees were set up to plan the reception, refreshments, prizes, music, entertainment and publicity. The women who worked on this committee were a who’s who of Herndon, including Mmes. Lynn, Kephart, Gillette, Carter, Steele, Bates, Gibson and White.

One of Thomas Wilson’s sons was Woodrow Walker Wilson, who went by the name “Woody.” Born in 1915, he was eighteen years old in 1933 and still living with his parents. He had recently lost two of his older siblings who died in 1931 and 1932. Woody had no money and no prospects for a real job. He quit school at the end of his eighth grade year and for a while he would occasionally find some temporary jobs. But he could not find enough work to buy food to support himself and his parents. Like his father, Woody felt useless.

Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps got started in 1933. The men who were recruited were to spend two weeks in training camps at vacant military posts where the trainees would use the barracks, showers, mess halls and surplus equipment. Training was run by U.S. Army reserve officers. The CCC recruits got used to living with each other in close quarters, were taught how to follow instructions, and were given three meals a day and medical attention.

Roosevelt decided that the first CCC project would be in the nearby Blue Ridge Mountains. Drought and tree disease had left parts of the Shenandoah Valley scarred. Unregulated drilling, mining and timbering also did much damage to the public land. The Corps would be employed to improve the national forest and to create the Shenandoah National Park.

The first CCC camp was Camp Roosevelt, located near Luray, Virginia. Enrollees were required to sign up for a minimum of six months. The local newspaper – the *Herndon Observer* – reported how young men who were coming and going from Camp Roosevelt. One of those

young men was twenty three year old Bernard R. Harrison who returned home to Herndon in 1934.

By July of 1934 the CCC was also recruiting World War I veterans. Announcements in newspapers indicated that these recruits had to be war veterans, were in good physical condition, were able to perform an ordinary day's work, demonstrated a willingness to learn, and were able to work with others.

In 1933 Woody went to a CCC recruitment office at Camp Humphreys (now Fort Belvoir) and signed up. The enrollees would work forty hours per week and earn thirty dollars per month (equivalent to about \$592 today). However, part of the agreement Woody signed was that twenty five of the thirty dollars he earned was required to be sent to a family dependent. That was fine with Woody as he knew the money sent home would be enough for his parents to buy the food they needed to survive.

Woody was assigned to Company 334 and spent two weeks training, eating, exercising and learning to take orders. Woody was not used to being too far from home, but he soon headed off to Shenandoah Park Camp Number One, which was called Skyland. Hundreds of CCC boys tackled many different jobs in the Shenandoah: removing dead trees, planting new ones, improving roads, and constructing trails and facilities. Woody worked as a road and trail worker.

Roosevelt himself came to visit Skyland in August of 1933. When camp members got wind of the pending visit, the boys at Skyland got busy cleaning up the camp. Roosevelt appeared in the back seat of an open convertible, smiling and waving.

Woody enjoyed the work he did in the Shenandoah and re-enlisted for another six months, continuing to send most of his pay back to his parents in Herndon. Months later Woody had the option to re-enlist for a third six-month term. He was eligible to be promoted to a supervisory position, which would have earned him an increase in pay.

Unfortunately, at about that same time, in March of 1934, Woody was visited by his brother-in-law, George Chappell. George, then a truck driver for a local feed company, was a few years older than Woody and lived in a rented house in Herndon with his wife, Agnes, Woody's sister. George brought Woody bad news. Woody's father, Thomas, had died. Without any explanation, Thomas Wilson walked out of his home to the shed in his back yard and shot himself. A death announcement noted that he had recently been employed with the local Civil Works Administration (CWA). The CWA was another job-creation program established by the New Deal. It rapidly created mostly construction and manual-labor jobs for unemployed workers, working primarily on roads and bridges. Although the CWA hired millions of workers, the jobs were temporary, lasting only for the duration of the severe winter of 1933-34, providing only short-term benefits for the unemployed.

Woody came home to be with his mother and attend the funeral. He soon decided, after helping to feed his family for about a year, that he would finish his current six-month term with the CCC but would not sign up for an additional six months. He started job hunting in Herndon after he got home.

Woody found a job delivering ice for a local ice house on Center Street. On one delivery, he met his future wife, Virginia. They married in 1936. By the end of that same year, as a result the work of the CCC, the Shenandoah National Park was established and it formally opened.

In 1940 Woody and Virginia were still living with Woody's mother, Lutie Wilson, at the Dranesville Road home. Woody worked as a truck driver for General Mills Larro Feed Store in downtown Herndon. Virginia worked as a sales lady at a dry cleaner store. Soon, however, Woody went on to serve in World War II in the Army Air Corps, which became the U.S. Air Force. The skills he learned in the CCC prepared him well for the military and his job as a ball turret gunner in a B-17 bomber.

Many of the young men who first entered the CCC had little purpose in life, but later learned to be hard working, self-confident and well-disciplined. About five percent of the male population in the United States took part in the CCC over the course of its nine-year history.

After his Army discharge in 1945, Woody returned to Herndon, where he and Virginia would remain for the rest of their lives. He ultimately became a volunteer fire fighter in Herndon and, after the closing of the Larro Feed Mill, he worked as a heating and air-conditioning technician for Fairfax County. Woody and his wife would sometimes take their daughters on picnic trips to the Shenandoah Valley. When driving along the graceful winding roads of Skyline Drive, Woody would proudly point out the beautiful stone walls that he had help build so many years ago.

About this column: "Remembering Herndon's History" is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of "Remembering Herndon's History" columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.

