WORK CAMPS AND EDUCATION

By

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The staff of the American Youth Commission, which has been conducting a study of the CCC, the NYA, and privately financed camps, estimates that over four million people in the United States have been connected with the work camp movement. That calculation may surprise some of you, for the work camp movement has grown so swiftly that few people appreciate how widespread it is. Here is another calculation that is surprising. The cost of all types of work camps in the United States this year is nearly 12 percent as great as our entire expenditures for public education, including elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher learning. The fact is that the CCC alone has in the last seven years cost every family in the nation a total of eighty-three dollars.

But this movement is more than big in enrollment and expenditures. It is vitally important, especially in this time of national defense. To appreciate one phase of its significance, let us turn to the nation whose power and efficiency have astounded the world.

The German labor service since 1935 has required six months of compulsory work with pick and shovel by all young men in camps. It has played an important part in the war activities of the Third Reich. Swinging in on the heels of the troops, carrying their polished shovels with the same precision as their older brothers who carried rifles, these strong, bronzed young 19-year-old Germans of the labor service cleared the roads of debris, helped repair the bridges, prepared quarters for the troops, strung telephone lines, set up supply depots, and generally provided services and supplies for the German soldiers.

Back of the lines the girls in the labor service, numbering some 50,000 when war broke out, but increasing in number to
300,000 within a few weeks after the beginning of hostilities, helped plant the crops and get in the harvests, fed the cattle, cared for the children, and lent a hand with the housework in the homes of the peasants whose husbands or sons had been killed in the first World War or were to run that same risk in the present one. Obviously the work camps have played a major role in the German war effort.

The National Socialists have long been proud of their labor service. In 1937 at the Nuremberg party congress, Hitler said, “The greatest thing accomplished by National Socialism in reaching the community goal has been the foundation of the labor service. We can never again visualize Germany without the Arbeitsdienst.”

In the pamphlet German Education Today, Gerhard Graefe and Theodor Wilhelm—two of the younger German educators whom I came to know quite well while I was studying labor camps in Germany during 1932-33 and 1936—state:

The school must realize that even though its methods of teaching were fundamentally altered, as a place of instruction it can make only a small contribution to education as a whole. Labor service, for instance, will perhaps for many years play a far more decisive part than the schools in the training of the youth of this country.

Our work camps in this country are very different from those of Hitler's Germany. They are a successful part of our democratic procedures. They neither enslave our youth nor indoctrinate them with propaganda. But they offer tangible values of immense importance in our national defense program, besides their values in time of peace.

Do you realize that there are right now in American work camps almost as many youth as there are college freshmen in the United States? These boys and girls may never as a group reach the intellectual, economic, and social heights of our college students, but as individuals in a democratic country, and as an element in our national well-being and our national security, they may prove to be just as important—boy for boy and girl for girl—as those who are in college.
commonwealth would follow. The military ideals of hardihood and discipline would be wrought into the growing fiber of the people; no one would remain blind, as the luxurious classes now are blind, to man's real relations to the globe he lives on... our gilded youth would be drafted off, according to their choice, to get the childishness knocked out of them and to come back into society with healthier sympathies and soberer ideas... they would tread the earth more proudly... they would be better fathers and teachers of the following generation.

None of these proposals, however, resulted immediately in the establishment of labor services such as we have today. It took the World War and its aftermath of disillusion and unemployed youth to launch the work camp movement.

The first actual camp was organized in 1920 by Pierre Ceresole, a Swiss pacifist with whom I worked in a camp in Wales during the summer of 1933. Assisted by the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Society of Friends, he organized a group of young men—some of whom had fought on opposite sides during the war—and helped in rebuilding the devastated areas of northern France.

The camps of the American Friends Service Committee in this country, which numbered twelve last summer, are an outgrowth of the movement started by Ceresole, which operates camps in various countries under the name of the International Voluntary Service for Peace.

About the same time that Swiss camps were begun, that is during the summer of 1925, some experimental camps were developed in Republican Germany under the leadership of the students and professors who wanted to teach the different classes of the youth—who were tending toward the extremes of communism and fascism—how to live and work together. During 1932 I lived in a room at a camp at Cismar, Germany, with two Nazis and two Communists, and lived to tell the tale. Another aim of the German movement was to give the youth who were overcrowding the universities an opportunity to work with their hands, lose their impractical tendencies, study the requirements for various types of jobs and perhaps be guided into nonacademic and nonprofessional pursuits. The camps of Republican Germany were conducted under private auspices until 1931, and some thirty camps had been developed.

In 1931 the Brüning government, faced with an unprecedented unemployment problem, subsidized the camps, and by the fall of 1931 some 280,000 young Germans of both sexes and from all classes were enrolled in the labor services. These camps were both successful and popular. Though the National Socialists opposed their control by the Republican government, they saw their possibilities as propaganda and training centers. I can assure you that the work camps were a fine antidote to the poisonous propaganda of hate and lies of the Nazis. Some German refugees state that if the camps had
taken in all needy German youth at an earlier date Hitler might never have gotten their support and taken over Germany.

As soon as Hitler became chancellor in 1933, all of these camps developed by Republican Germany were coordinated under Konstantin Hierl, the national leader of the labor service. It was then only a matter of time before participation in the German work service became an obligation of youth to the state, and a regular part of training for life in the so-called “New Germany.” Hitler has used the camps just as he has used the schools, the press, the radio, and the moving pictures, to propagandize and poison the minds of the youth in Germany.

But as I said earlier, the work camp can contribute very greatly to the democratic process and was first developed under democratic auspices. The camps in the Scandinavian countries, England, Switzerland, and the United States are proof of this.

Basic Elements in an Ideal Work Camp

Having discussed the origin and development of the work camp we can now proceed to consider the basic elements that go to make up an ideal work camp.

First of all, the camps provide work experience on projects of public benefit. Work has always played a very important part in the lives of the American people. Some of our greatest Americans are thought of first of all in connection with the work that they did—George Washington surveying the wilderness; Abraham Lincoln splitting rails, carrying hogsheads of flour, and poling a flatboat down the Ohio River. Until the last few decades, much of the work was in connection with the conquering of the vast natural areas stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Recently, as the reports of the American Youth Commission indicate, there are large numbers of youth who come to adulthood without the beneficial experiences that are derived from work—work of any kind, but particularly work in the out of doors that has a higher motive than individual reward.

This latter type of work was exemplified in early colonial times when the neighbors got together to help a new settler raise his barn, build his house, get in a supply of wood for the winter, husk his corn, or perform other projects of similar importance. But today, due to changes in our economic system, it is no longer possible for many youth to obtain this type of work experience. There are few opportunities for the lad raised in an apartment in a large city, or even on a suburban lot, to do anything more than dust the piano, wash a few dishes, or take the dog for a walk. These are “piddling” jobs and cannot compare with the type of work that youth were required to do in early colonial times.

The importance of work close to nature is symbolized in Greek mythology by the tale about the giant Antaeus whose mother was the Earth. As you remember he was very strong, and in a battle with the cunning Hercules held his own until Hercules raised Antaeus’ feet from the ground. He then became weak and Hercules was able to best him in the combat. Perhaps the American people by congregating in cities of steel, concrete, and asphalt, where they have few contacts with the soil, are weakening themselves.

Work experience is then one of the major elements in a work camp. According to a recent publication of the American Youth Commission, What the High Schools Ought to Teach:

Young people need to learn to work. Labor is the lot of man and it has not been recognized as it should have been in arranging educational institutions. . . . There is no factor in general education which is more important to consider than work.

The second major element in work camps is training and education. Above all, the camps should provide training related to the work experiences of these youth. In the American Youth Commission study of the Civilian Conservation Corps, we administered a battery of tests to some 2,000 en-
rollees in ten experimental CCC camps; these tests were given when the enrollees first entered and then six months and a year later. We found that the youth who made the greatest progress in the fields measured by our battery of tests were not the youth who only studied in these fields nor the youth who only worked in these fields, but were the youth who both worked and studied. Realistic related training should therefore be one of the major phases of the work camp program.

But the training should not stop there. The whole camp life and experience should be educational. There should be a sound counseling and guidance program to help the youth determine their abilities, so that they could be placed where they would derive the most benefit from the work experiences and related training programs. Instruction in health, first aid, and safety should also be provided. There should be discussion groups on camp problems and current affairs. Each camp should be provided with a well-stocked library. But all of the instruction should be related to the work the youth do and the activities they engage in while in the camps.

The third basic element in the work camp is the socializing or group life experience for the youth. One of the basic premises upon which we have built the United States has been that, regardless of class, particularly regardless of economic status, each individual should be permitted to make progress according to his merits. The democratizing influence of the frontier, where everyone started on essentially the same level, no longer exists. But we must continue to make it possible for representatives from the different classes to associate. The work camps provide an excellent opportunity for youth from various parts of the country and from different social classes to live together, to work together, and to study together.

Finally, in an ideal work camp the youth, by taking major responsibility for all phases of camp life—particularly in helping plan and carry out the training and educational program, and working out rules of conduct—are given an opportunity, many of them for the first time in their lives, to assume the responsibilities of an individual within a democratic community.

**Relationship of Work Camps to the Established Institutions**

It seems clear to the staff of the American Youth Commission from its studies of work camps that this institution is here to stay as a permanent part of the educational system of our country. If this is a correct conclusion we must then decide what should be the relationship between the established school system and these work camps.

Frequently individuals considering this question take one extreme position or another. They either assume that the camps compete with schools and should be abolished, or they take the position at the other extreme that the camps should be continued as completely separate institutions, which should not come under the domination of the schools. Those who take the latter position characterize the schools as academic, stereotyped, or sterile and say that they have already failed to provide the type of youth who go into these camps with training and education that is adapted to their needs and their interests.

I cannot agree with either of these positions. I do not believe that the camps should be abolished, nor do I believe that they should be conducted entirely separate from the school systems. It seems to me that a plan must be worked out whereby these systems of camps become an integrated part of the program for the care and education of American youth.

In order to be specific, let us consider for a moment the Civilian Conservation Corps. It seems to me that the CCC camps should be continued as federally financed agencies to provide youth from the lower economic levels who have not adjusted well to the established schools with food, clothing, shelter, and a small wage while they work on projects conserving the natural resources of the United States.

Our democratic society has provided these CCC youth with an opportunity to attend school eleven years. Our schools
have certified to their completion of eight and three-quarters grades, and their ancestors and environment have given them a mental ability equivalent to that of pupils half way through the sixth grade. But on achievement tests in reading and arithmetic they were able to attain a level of only five and a half grades. It should be obvious from these findings that youth in the CCC have not achieved to the level of their ability in their regular school experience and that it is possible to demonstrate real growth in work camp situations such as are provided in the CCC.

The work projects of the Civilian Conservation Corps would continue to be concerned with the conservation of the basic natural resources of the United States. In spite of the work of the CCC and the other governmental agencies, there is still enough work, real work, to keep the present enrollment of the CCC—270,000 young men—occupied for at least the next twenty-five years, preventing soil erosion, planting trees, thinning forests, building firebreaks, eliminating pests and rodents, developing recreational areas, and performing the myriad other activities carried on by the CCC during the first seven years of its life.

So far as the educational aspects of the camps are concerned, it seems to me that the United States Office of Education should act in an advisory capacity to the Civilian Conservation Corps in the development of the training program. I also feel that the training program in the camps should be a work-centered program, and that these camps should not compete with the established school systems nor attempt to do everything within an individual camp that the public school systems should have done for these enrollees. The camp training program should include a guidance program, a training program for illiterates, the essentials of healthful living, social training, citizenship training, religious training, and recreational activities. But an attempt should be made, as I said before, to relate all of this instruction to the real work that the enrollees are actually doing in the camps; work should not be developed simply to meet someone's notion of curriculum needs.

At the present time the CCC is operating under a complicated administrative plan. It seems to the staff of the American Youth Commission that the Civilian Conservation Corps should become a unified agency within the Federal Security Agency so that it can develop close relationships with the National Youth Administration, the United States Office of Education, the Public Health Service, and the Employment Service, and be fitted into a master plan for all youth-serving agencies.

**National Youth Administration Resident Centers**

So far as the resident centers of the National Youth Administration are concerned, the staff of the American Youth Commission believes that they should be continued as part of the program financed by the federal government. These youth projects should enroll a slightly higher type of youth from the standpoint of education, intelligence, and social background than do the CCC camps. The work program of these resident centers should provide a little more advanced work experience—facilities for the school systems could be improved, recreation centers, clinics, and hospitals constructed, and labor provided for other public works projects.

The training program within the resident centers should be related definitely to what the youth do in the centers, and, where possible, close relationships should be developed with the established educational institutions, so that they can provide any additional educational activities considered to be desirable. It is the firm conviction of the staff of the American Youth Commission that resident centers should be developed only where they will supplement, not compete with, the established school systems.

I said at the outset that both the CCC and the NYA should be coordinated with the established training and educational agencies within the various communities. This, it seems to me,
assumes the establishment within each area of a community youth council, which would be made up of representatives from the schools, the employment service, employers, labor unions, the public health services, the churches, and recreational associations. This council would serve as a place where the youth, regardless of their status, their background, or their interests, could go and with the assistance of trained interviewers be referred to that agency best adapted to their needs and their interests. This whole plan visualizes sufficient flexibility in the program so that a youth, regardless of where he begins his work in one of these agencies, can move on to higher training provided that he demonstrates his ability to benefit from the institutions on a higher level.

PRIVATE CAMPS

I have mentioned from time to time, in the course of this speech, privately financed work camps that exist in this country. I had in mind the three camps for high school students run last summer by Associated Junior Work Camps; the twelve camps of the American Friends Service Committee, which enroll mainly pacifists and Quakers who want to show that they can do constructive work in place of military service; and finally, the projects of Work Camps for America, an organization which is developing a series of camps for college students in order to provide them with a type of laboratory experience in the field of the social sciences.

These privately financed camps have been organized in this country now for some seven years, and in my opinion they have demonstrated their values as institutions supplementing the established school systems by providing students, first, with work experience on projects of public benefit; second, with an opportunity to associate with other types of youth and with people in other social communities; third, with a laboratory experience in the social problem areas of the country; and finally, with an experience in self-government and democratic procedures.

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These private camps should at least be developed in close cooperation with the schools. It would be even better if the schools on the secondary level and the colleges and universities would see in work camps an opportunity to provide excellent supplementary experience for the youth who are attending their institutions, and would run camps of their own.

Field trips are provided for students of geology, entomology, and botany. Engineering students frequently spend the summer working on engineering projects. An essential part of the training and experience of medical students is obtained by working in clinics and hospitals. Archaeologists spend many a long and tedious hour digging relics from their ancient resting places. Why shouldn't students in the social sciences receive a comparable experience by living and working in a strife-torn industrial town, a seriously eroded rural area, or a village torn by racial prejudices? Regardless of how well courses in the social studies are conducted, they cannot take the place of actual experience within the social problem areas of the United States—of living, working, and talking with the human beings who contribute to or make up that social problem.

I believe that the work camp movement has great significance for the young people who participate in it, and for education in general in the United States. I hope that in the future all of you will have a personal and professional interest in work camps. If each of you will consider the possibility of connecting the work camp movements to your own institutions, your own work, and your own activities, then solutions will surely be found for the many problems of integration, expansion, and adaptation. I believe the work camps are here to stay. I believe the need for them is apparent. It is your job and that of your fellow educators throughout the country to face the reality, to understand the need, and to apply your knowledge, your experience, and your enthusiasm to this new and powerful instrument of education.