

THE STORY OF THE 517TH COMPANY

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established in 1933 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as one of the first programs in the New Deal. The CCC was designed as a work program for young men from age 18 to 25, who would sign up for a renewable six-month term during which they would work on projects mostly related to land management and park construction. They received a \$30 per month stipend, \$25 of which was sent home to their families. A number of Indiana's state parks were built by the CCC. It was and remains one of the most popular programs of the New Deal.

The Company 517 of the CCC was established in 1934. After training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, the 517th was stationed in Corydon at Camp Wyandotte from May 1934 to October 1937. From there the 517th moved to South Bend for two years and then on to Portland, in eastern Indiana, for its final two years. Company 517 finally disbanded in 1941, as the country turned its attention toward the escalating conflict in Europe. While at Camp Wyandotte, the 517th graded roads, built stone walls, planted many

trees, and constructed buildings that still stand today. The 517th even helped victims of the devastating 1937 flood that impacted many of Indiana's Ohio River communities.

But it wasn't all conservation work for the CCC. The men not only learned valuable trade skills, but also received an education in the classroom. The young men took classes on a variety of topics, including mechanical drawing, typing, foreign languages, and art. They also participated in extracurricular activities, including boxing, debating, and a singing quartet.

Indiana had 56 CCC companies, eight of which were African American. Despite wording in the legislation that created the CCC that disallowed discrimination, the program was segregated based on race because of the prevailing racial attitudes of the day. The 517th, which had about 250 men, was the largest and most enduring of Indiana's African American companies. Other African American companies were stationed in Bloomington, Mitchell, Evansville, Cromwell, and several other locations throughout the state.



A CCC worker posing by a truck loaded with trees for planting. Image courtesy of Frank Wilson.



Memories made naturally.
INDIANA STATE PARKS

DISCOVER • CHALLENGE • EXPLORE

HOOSIER QUEST-Pin & Patch Program

Each state park offers you the opportunity to complete tasks to earn a patch or property pin.

 on.IN.gov/hoosierquest

BOOK YOUR STAY • RESERVE TODAY


GET OUT and GO CAMPING

Call or go online to make your reservation for all types of

- Camping
- Family Cabins
- Shelters

Includes state parks, reservoirs and forests.

 1-866-6campIN
(1-866-622-6746)

 camp.IN.gov


STAY IN at a STATE PARK INN

Call or go online to make your reservation for a(n)

- State Park Inn
- Inns-managed Cabin

Seven State Parks include Inns: Brown County, Clifty Falls, Fort Harrison, McCormick's Creek, Spring Mill, Turkey Run and Pokagon.

 1-877-lodges1
(1-877-563-4371)

 IndianalInns.com



For a full list of events, visit interpretiveservices.IN.gov



Please carry out all trash you produce to help keep the property clean and beautiful for all to enjoy!



FOLLOW US



OUTDOOR
INDIANA

Subscribe to Outdoor Indiana magazine today, Visit OutdoorIndiana.org or call 317-233-3046.

The programs, services, facilities, and activities of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources are available to everyone. DNR prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, sex, or disability. If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Department of Natural Resources, Executive Office, 402 W. Washington Street, W256, Indianapolis, IN 46204, (317) 232-4020.

DNR
Indiana Department
of Natural Resources


O'BANNON WOODS STATE PARK

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN INDIANA'S CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS 517



Property Manager's residence built by the 517th in 1937.

O'Bannon Woods State Park
7234 Old Forest Road SW
Corydon, IN 47112

 (812) 738-8232

 on.IN.gov/obannonwoodssp

 obannonwoodssp@dnr.IN.gov

on.IN.gov/stateparks

FRANK WILSON'S STORY

After dropping out of school in eighth grade, Frank Wilson saw the CCC as a great opportunity to work, so he joined in 1934. He was attached to the 517th and headed to Fort Knox to train. A month later, he and the rest of the 517th were in Corydon at Camp Wyandotte.

Wilson began as a laborer in the CCC. But after about a year, because of cooking classes he had taken in school, he was transferred to kitchen duties. He was sent to Fort Benjamin Harrison for special training. He also received a small increase in pay and the chance to remain in the CCC longer than the normal six-month term. Wilson was with the 517th throughout its existence, from Corydon to South Bend to Portland.

Later in life, Wilson shared that he was unsure of how an African American company would be received by the towns where they were stationed. In an interview in 1994 for Portland's newspaper, the Commercial Review, Wilson said, "There were 250 of us after all. It was an all-black unit. And it worried a lot of the towns we went

WILLIAM MEYERS' STORY

William Meyers graduated from Crispus Attucks High School in Indianapolis in 1932, and after working various jobs for a couple of years, he joined the CCC and the 517th in 1934.

Meyers showed a knack for leadership early. He began as a CCC laborer but soon worked his way up to foreman. Meyers also became head of "A" barracks. For recreation, he sang in a quartet along with Frank Wilson and two other members of the 517th. Their singing group was heard on local Louisville radio stations. After his time in Corydon with the 517th, Meyers was transferred to Fort Benjamin Harrison, where he became a senior foreman for Co. 3550. He was discharged from the CCC in 1937.

After his time in the CCC, Meyers enjoyed a long and fruitful career. After two and a half decades as an Indianapolis firefighter, he changed careers and began working for Indiana National Bank.

Meyers was also active in civic leadership. He served as a precinct committeeman, was appointed to the Marion County Tax Adjustment Board, and was elected to the Indianapolis School Board.



Frank Wilson and friends posing for a picture while taking a break from conservation work.

into. But it was a good bunch of fellows and I think we had the best reception of all in Portland."

After leaving the CCC in 1941, Wilson worked for 25 years at National Cash Register in Muncie. In that same newspaper interview, reflecting on his time in the CCC, Wilson said, "I've had a real good life and it all stems from the CCC Camp. That was a good life for young men who were just on the streets when we started."



William Meyers and his barracks mates, 1934.

In the 1937 edition of the Fort Ben Banner, the CCC camp's newsletter, Meyers wrote an essay titled, "What I Have Got out of the CCC Personally." Regarding his experiences, he wrote that "the youth of the United States had never received the best kind of training until the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps ..." Extolling the education he gained during his time in the CCC, Meyers concluded his essay by writing that the CCC taught him "how to live—what to live for—and where to live best."

O'BANNON WOODS STATE PARK

The area where the 517th worked was purchased by the Indiana Department of Conservation, the DNR's predecessor, in 1932. After the work of the 517th planting forests and building recreational facilities, the site became Harrison-Crawford State Forest. O'Bannon Woods State Park, established in 2005, is nestled within the 26,000-acre state forest bordering the Ohio River. The park was named in honor of then-Indiana Gov. Frank O'Bannon, a Corydon native, after his untimely death.

The park offers modern electric campsites and an equestrian campground. Indiana's first natural and scenic river, the Blue River, flows through the state park and forest. Wyandotte Caves are operated by the park. Big Wyandotte Cave is open for tours on weekends between Memorial Day weekend and Labor Day. Little Wyandotte Cave (Siebert's Cave) tours are available on weekends during the summer, and tours can be scheduled for groups year-round. The Corydon Capitol State Historic Site is located near the park. Visitors can learn about early Indiana history as they tour the old town square and the beautiful first state Capitol.



The leaders of 517th Company at Camp Wyandotte.

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS

Benjamin Clark, Ph.D.

Cultural Resources Manager
DNR Division of State Parks
402 W. Washington St., Rm. W298
Indianapolis, IN 46204

Cell: 317-694-5111

Office: 317-234-6442

Email: bclark@dnr.IN.gov

FURTHER READING

- "A Remembrance of the CCC," the Commercial Review, Portland, Indiana, October 7, 1994
- Robert Sander, "CCC Camp #517," *Outdoor Indiana*, Vol. 59, No. 2, March/April 1994
- Benjamin Clark, "New Deal or 'Raw Deal,'" MA thesis, scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/items/d81d8f2e-b61d-458c-890d-3e0fa1f2e617
- William Meyers Collection, Indiana Historical Society
- Civilian Conservation Corps Company 517 Photographs, Indiana Historical Society