



With Pulaskis in hand, young adults of the Montana Conservation Corps work together to blaze trails, cut brush, and otherwise improve Montana's outdoors.



As the shout “Fire in the hole! Fire in the hole!” rings out, crew leader Bob Ellenbecker and six other Montana Conservation Corps (MCC) crew members make themselves small behind stout trees and huge boulders. *Kerwhomp!* The dynamite blast momentarily shatters the stillness of the serene mountain valley.

As the dust settles, the crew makes sure the explosive has split the huge boulder that had been blocking a trail. Now halfway through their ten-week stint on a remote section of the Cliff Creek Trail in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the tanned and muscular young men and women know what's next. After pulling on well-worn gloves, they pick up their trusty shovels, spud bars, and Pulaskis (axe-hoe hybrids named after an early 20th-century U.S. Forest Service ranger) and begin another long day of hard physical work.

As the noise of steel striking stone rattles through the trees, Ellenbecker recalls another sound that filtered through camp a few nights earlier, when wolves howled their lonely song into the cold mountain air. “They couldn't have been much more than a quarter-mile away,” he says. “Later that day we heard another wolf howl even closer.”

Generation Axe

By Perry Backus

GET 'ER DONE Young men and women age 17 to 25 from across the country join Montana Conservation Corps crews to improve the environment, the community, and themselves.



ROCK ON Dynamite dislodges the biggest boulders blocking trails, but MCC crews use their backs and spud bars to move the rest.

Tough but rewarding

A nonprofit organization funded with public and donor dollars, the MCC offers a unique combination of grueling labor, intense teamwork, civil service, and the opportunity to spend a summer in some of Montana's wildest and most scenic locales. Crews build and improve trails, manage invasive weeds, put up fencing, and reduce wildfire risks across Montana. Every summer, hundreds of young people from across the country join the MCC for five- to nine-month terms. Some come to test themselves against the wilderness; others want to help the environment; many do it for the several thousand dollars in college tuition they can earn.

Some join not knowing what they are getting into—and end up drawing on inner resources they never knew they possessed. Ellenbecker, who hails from Wisconsin and is a student at the University of Montana, recalls supervising a 20-something woman from New York City. She had no outdoors experience and arrived in Montana with almost no gear. He immediately saw that the urbanite was physically ill-prepared for the rigors to come. “The first time she hiked the 15 miles to our camp at Cliff Creek, she really struggled,” Ellenbecker says. “But by the end of

the ten weeks we spent there, she was doing it in just three hours. It was something to watch this woman from New York get to where she was knocking down trees 100 feet tall with a crosscut saw.”

Putting city folk to work in the backcountry has a long history in Montana. The MCC traces its legacy to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, which provided jobs for young men unable to find employment during the Great Depression (see sidebar on page 34). Its good work from more than half a century ago is still visible today in landmarks—such as

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Lewis & Clark Caverns (Montana's first state park)—scattered across the state.

After the CCC ended in 1942, the civilian conservation concept wasn't resurrected again in the state until Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and the Human Resource Development councils in Billings, Bozeman, and Kalispell teamed up to establish the MCC. The first crews began working in 1991 on projects coordinated by Steve Nelsen, the program's first director. “The MCC really began with little more than a hope and a prayer,” says Nelsen. “The first day I arrived at my office all I had was a desk, a phone, and a box of Kleenex.”

The program's goal from the outset was to create good citizens through work requiring both sweat and cooperation. “Within these crews people learn how to work with each other,” Nelsen says. “It's really democracy at its most basic level. You learn to participate. You learn what it's about to be part of a group working toward a common goal. A young person who spends a year or even a summer being a good citizen will likely become a good citizen for life.”

Federal support

The MCC got a big financial boost in 1993 when it became part of the new AmeriCorps system, a domestic version of the Peace Corps. The federal funds more than doubled the organization's budget and allowed it to establish regional offices. The MCC now operates from offices in Billings, Bozeman (headquarters), Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, and Missoula.

Early on, the MCC began building a reputation for tackling difficult trail restoration jobs. One of those was at Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park. Park managers worried that petroleum products would leach from the old asphalt trail winding through the caverns and damage cave formations. They wanted to remove the old trail (installed a half-century before by the CCC) and build a new one using concrete. It would be hard,

dirty work, so they called on the Montana Conservation Corps.

Lynette Kemp, park manager, says that power equipment can't be used in the caverns, so the MCC crews had to carefully remove nearly a half-mile of asphalt one bucket at a time. "It was back-breaking work," she says of the project, which took

place in the early 1990s. "They were on their hands and knees for hours at a time making sure they didn't leave any asphalt behind." When the crews finished carrying out the asphalt, they had to haul concrete and water into the caverns using the same buckets.

Since then, the MCC has also built cabins and carved out miles of new trails through

portions of the park that previously had seen little use. During one winter, when the park was closed, crews carefully cleaned dust and dirt off stalactites and stalagmites. "That was a tedious job," says Kemp. "They had to carry in all the cleaning water, and a lot of times they actually had to use toothbrushes to do the cleaning. It would have been really

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It's not just a willingness to do grunt work that makes MCC crews so valuable. At Lone Pine State Park near Kalispell, a popular trail needed to be rerouted after park officials learned it veered onto private property. The new trail had to be built along challenging terrain at the base of a cliff. Park

manager Dave Landstrom was confident the MCC crew could figure out a way to make the reroute work. “It's an extremely popular trail, and some of our regular visitors were concerned about it being rerouted and not looking as nice,” he says. “The MCC crew we worked with showed a lot of creativity by incorporating rock steps and other nicely

crafted features. People were very pleased with the end product.”

Building resumes, too

Joining an MCC crew is by no means lucrative; even some fast food chains pay better. But the work has rewards you can't get slinging burritos.

Each MCC crew has two co-leaders and four to five corps members. Crew leaders are typically in their mid-20s and have previous leadership or natural resource experience. During their nine-month stint, the leaders put in 1,700-plus hours, during which they're provided a \$545 biweekly living stipend, health insurance, and a one-time \$4,725 grant for future schooling or educational loans. They also receive extensive training in technical skills such as chainsaw operation, trail construction, and wilderness first aid. Corps members join for 20 weeks between May and October. Their biweekly stipend is \$480, plus a \$2,363 educational grant at the end of their service.

Though the money isn't great, the work has many benefits. Crew members commonly talk about feeling stronger at the end of the season. Many leave with a heightened interest in staying involved in their community as volunteers and land stewards. Friendships made during stints in the wilderness often last lifetimes. Landstrom, the state park manager at Kalispell, says that when it comes time to hire park staff, he always looks for MCC experience on resumes. “That kind of experience is hugely valuable for people looking to work in our field,” he says. “You can't beat having that on a job application.”

Not everyone has what it takes to commit to an MCC stint, says Jono McKinney, MCC's executive director. “People have to be willing to work hard, learn about themselves, and be part of a crew,” he says. “They have to be able to live and work together with different people. It can be tough.”

MCC members are also expected to attend meetings of the local city council or some



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PAVING THE WAY Having removed an old asphalt trail at Lewis & Clark Caverns, an MCC crew lays in a new cement pathway. A few years later, a crew took on the task of cleaning the caverns' famous but dirty stalactites and stalagmites.

other public board. And they're required to volunteer some of their own time to help with any cause that interests them. "We want people to become involved in their community for the rest of their lives," McKinney says.

Miles of trails

During the past field season, MCC crews improved 887 miles of existing trails and built 29 miles of new trails on national forests, state parks, and other public lands. They also removed or built 48 miles of new fence, controlled weeds on 1,171 acres, and reduced fire danger by clearing brush on 171 acres. In addition, they assisted in restoring 12 miles of stream and planted roughly 50,000 trees and shrubs.

MCC crews also helped construct 11 homes, worked on 95 community buildings, and weatherized 1,456 homes in 151 different communities as part of Montana's Warm Hearts, Warm Homes Program.

Chase Jones, who has participated in the MCC for several years, says that he liked the fact that his work combined environmental improvement in wilderness areas with helping people in towns and cities winterize their homes. "Sometimes it's hard to realize your impact when you're in some remote field location," he says. "But when you help people winterize their homes,

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LEAHANNA BRADY/MCC

FROM TRAILS TO TOWNS In addition to building and improving trails on public land, MCC crews do work such as (from left to right) installing a temporary fish barrier to protect native cutthroat trout from non-native fish on Crooked Creek in the Pryor Mountains; stabilizing a stream bank with willow shoots on Ten Mile Creek near Rimini; weatherstripping a residence in Helena; and building garden beds in Missoula.

you really can see firsthand the true value of volunteerism."

In 2002, Jones helped start MCC's MontanaYES (Youth Engaged in Service) Program, which serves local youth age 14 to 17. During the five-week sessions (sort of mini-MCC summer stints) offered in com-

munities across the state, teens do community service and help with natural resource projects. Jones has heard plenty of praise for the program from both participants and their parents. "The kids told me they found it fun to serve other people," he says. "Some said they hadn't known they could do such

MCC: the legacy of a great social experiment



In 1933, the United States was in the midst of a nationwide crisis.

Two million able-bodied men were out of work. Hunger was widespread. Drought had begun turning the heartland into dust. Newspapers ran photographs of people lined up at soup kitchens, worry etched deeply into their faces.

Such desperate times required desperate remedies. Yet when President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced formation of the Civilian Conservation Corps during his first

A CCC poster from 1938.

100 days in office, he faced doubters from both sides of the political spectrum. Liberals worried it would force wages of union workers down to starvation levels. Conservatives called the proposal fascist and said it would waste public monies.

Congress eventually consented, however, and between 1933 and 1942 (the year the CCC was disbanded) it spent roughly \$3 billion on the program. In Montana, more than \$42 million was spent on projects many residents and visitors still enjoy. "They left us with an incredible legacy," says Stan Cohen, Missoula author of *The Tree Army: A Pictorial History of the Conservation Corps 1933-1942*. "Projects like Camp Paxson at Seeley Lake and the Ninemile Ranger Station near Missoula are still being used."

Most Civilian Conservation Corps camps were run by the U.S. Army.



physical work. Others were happy to discover they could make a difference in their communities by just getting involved.” Parents, he adds, were surprised their kids were willing to take on new responsibilities after returning home. “Their kids actually volunteered to do the dishes,” he says.

By becoming involved in the MCC, a teenager who starts doing household chores can soon become a young adult who blazes trails, helps seniors keep warm, and builds stronger local communities. “What we do is show young people how to become good citizens,” says McKinney. 🐾

Throughout 2007, the Montana Conservation Corps will be offering five-week Youth Engaged in Service Program sessions in different communities across the state. To sign up, apply to be an MCC crew member, or learn more about the organization, visit the MCC website at mtcorps.org.



The work was supervised by federal land management agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Soil Conservation Service.

During each of the nine years the program lasted, roughly two dozen camps were maintained in Montana. Each camp typically housed about 200 men age 18 to 25. The crews were issued food, clothing, and equipment through the CCC’s regional headquarters at Fort Missoula. As in the military, the men worked in teams and weren’t allowed to quit before their six-month enlistment ended.

More than 25,000 Montanans joined the program. By the time the CCC ended, they and another 15,000 men from across the country had spent time in the state building

trails, planting trees, and constructing buildings—work similar to what MCC crews continue to do today.

“The program helped jump-start the conservation movement in this country,” Cohen says. “It put people to work in the woods and built a variety of important pieces of infrastructure that Montanans still enjoy.”



Fish Creek Bridge, once located a few miles west of Alberton, was typical of the structures built by the CCC in Montana.