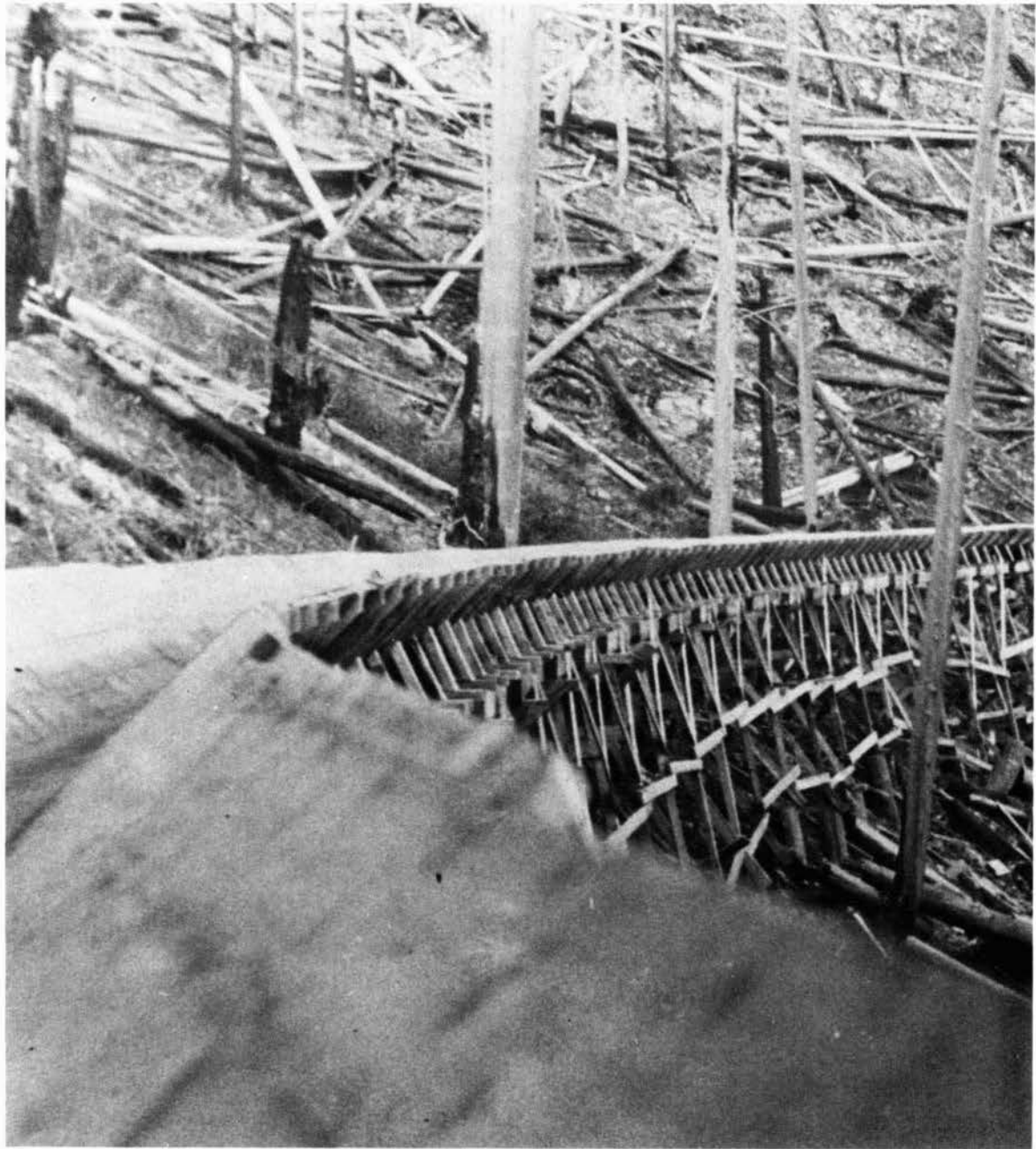


The St. Lawrence County Historical Association
QUARTERLY

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Mission Statement

The St. Lawrence County Historical Association is a not-for-profit educational resource center and museum that researches, collects, preserves, and interprets St. Lawrence County history through collections development, publication, exhibition, and programming; whose purpose is to help establish the intellectual and cultural connections that expand awareness and place St. Lawrence County in its state and national context, while revealing its unique identity. The Association examines different aspects of life in St. Lawrence County from multiple and diverse resources through community partnerships and collaboration.

SLCHA values quality, integrity, and accessibility and operates within established museum standards befitting its AAM accredited status.

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Cover:

Detail of photograph of Wanakena CCC Camp
lumber sluice (*from the SLCHA Archives*).

The Civilian Conservation Corps in St. Lawrence County

by Ann M. Fusco

Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President of the United States in 1932 at a time when the world was in a serious economic depression. Unemployment averaged 12 million, 24% of the work force.¹ President Hoover failed to react to the great need of the American people. He also failed to recognize the people's feelings of despair. Roosevelt took power on Inauguration Day, March 4, 1933. The new leader set into motion unprecedented government action to set the American economy on the road to recovery. Deeply troubled by unemployed idle youth, Roosevelt addressed this problem immediately.

On March 9, 1933 a new Congress met. That evening President Roosevelt called several men to the White House. Attending were the Secretaries of War, Agriculture, and Interior, as well as the Solicitor of the Interior. Also present was the Director of the Budget and the Judge Advocate General of the Army. Between his election and taking office, Roosevelt had given much thought to a solution for the plight of unemployed American youth. The concept of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was born that night.²

The President equated wasting the talents of American youth to squandering our national resources.



The Civilian Conservation Corps logo.

Roosevelt was an advocate of conservation, critical of the exploitation of America's resources by industry and commerce over the last fifty years.³ An American writer, Thomas Menchan, called the aimless youth who were traveling back and forth across the nation in search of work "the boy and girl tramps of America."⁴ More than 25% of the single men between 18 and 25 were

out of work, of those who worked, 29% did so only part time.⁵ Armed with a majority in Congress, the President had a mandate for action. The CCC became the first enactment of the new administration. Roosevelt launched an undertaking comparable only to the mobilization of an army during a World War.⁶

Despite opposition the CCC took form by Executive Order No.



SLCHA Archives

Training opportunities and activities as depicted in the CCC Foremanship Manual (Washington, D.C.: 1939).

601 on April 5, 1933.⁷ The Agricultural and Interior Departments supervised the actual conservation projects. The main focus of the program was reforestation. In time, two million trees were planted, and the CCC was nicknamed Roosevelt's Tree Army.⁸ The camps also restored national historical sites, built national park facilities, cleaned and enlarged reservoirs, and assisted in fighting forest fires.⁹ The results outweighed the costs. As historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote later in a tribute to the CCC and its members, "they left monuments in the preservation and purification

of the land, the water, the forests, and the young men of America."¹⁰

By the end of June 1933, 239,000 young men had been organized into companies of 200 men and assigned to a camp. Prior to this, able-bodied unemployed men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five were accepted at local welfare offices. They had to be willing to do manual work, and were sent to pre-conditioning army camps. There, they were issued uniforms and conditioned physically. The army provided transportation to their final destination. Veterans served regardless of age, and 225,000 World War I veterans

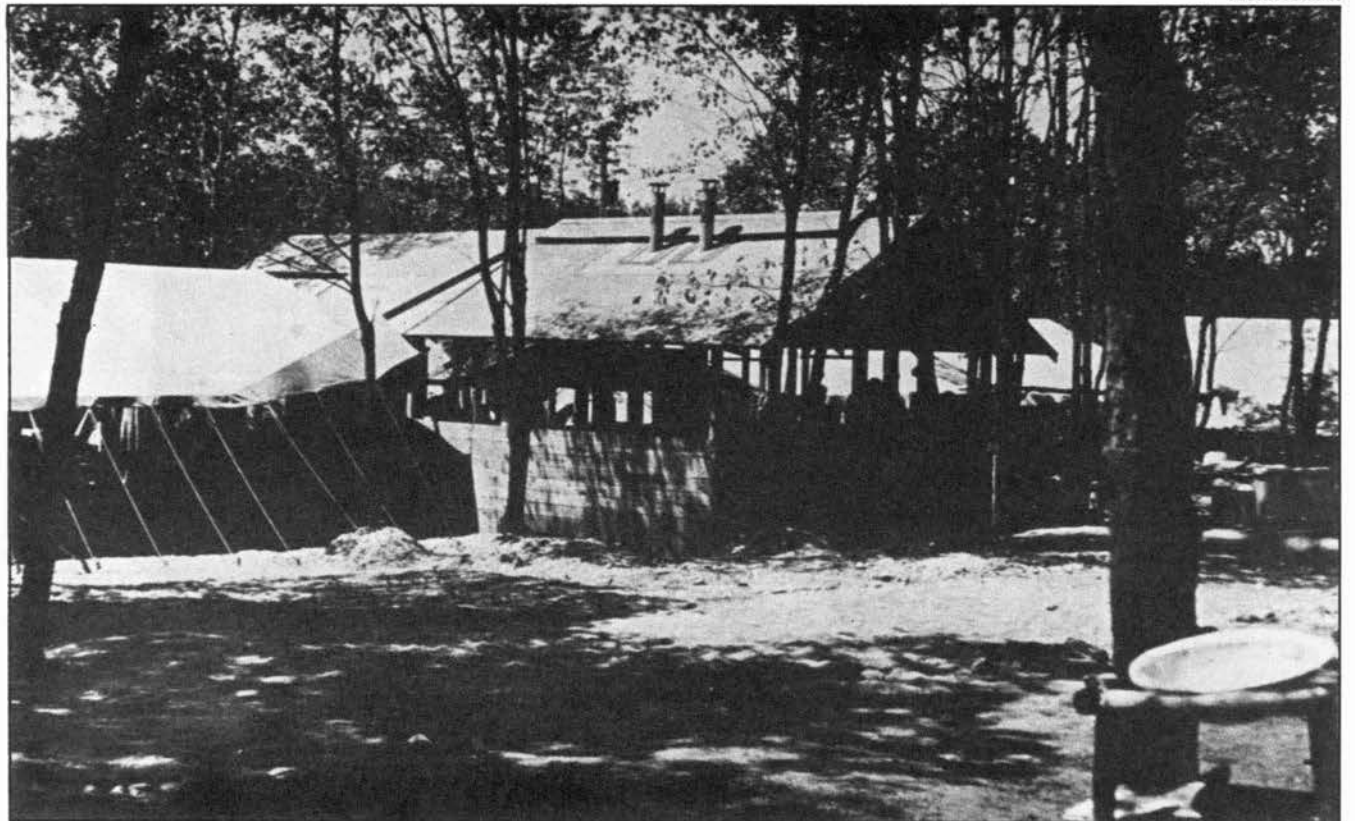
did so. Later, the CCC was extended to older men of need and forestry experience, eventually including 15,000 native Americans and 200,000 black members.¹¹ The pay was \$30.00 a month. The men were able to keep \$5.00 for personal use, and the rest was sent home to their families. The camp personnel were composed of two regular army officers, one reserve corps officer, four regular army enlisted men, as well as a forestry work supervisor and his foremen. Most camps were west of the Mississippi River, as most conservation



N.Y. Ranger School photograph in SLCHA Archives

*Above: Aerial photograph of the CCC camp at Wanakena, along Route 3.
Below: Photograph of the Wanakena camp in summer.*

SLCHA Archives





N.Y. Ranger School photograph in SLCHA Archives

Above and below: Winter time views of the Wanakena CCC camp.

SLCHA Archives



work was needed there. At least one camp existed in each state. Camps were distributed according to population.

Despite southern resistance and opposition from Director Robert Fechner the camps were open to all races, but were segregated.¹² Roosevelt continued to advocate black participation regardless of resistance. He saw the camps as an opportunity to advance black leadership. The President authorized thirty-nine Negro reserve officers. He issued an executive order for Negro education officers, and by 1937, 152 out of 2,000 officers were black. Roosevelt inquired about the lack of black chaplains and medical officers to administer to black recruits, and was able to improve the numbers.¹³ Although the President was unable to keep the camps from being segregated, advancement and participation by black people was accomplished. The economic help to the black families was needed. The education and skills learned by black youth was considerable. Within the camp, segregated or not, 35,000 men learned to read and write while in the Corps.¹⁴

New York benefited substantially from the CCC program. Governor Herbert Lehman was a close friend of President Roosevelt. Both were New Dealers, agreeing that the economic emergency required unprecedented action by government. They believed that only government could save American democracy and capitalism. An alliance had been formed by these two men, along with Mayor La Guardia of New York City, during the depression years.¹⁵ Lehman's

only disagreement was that he preferred New York youth to remain in the state. He along with other leaders felt it was a waste of resources to send the men all over the country. He diligently petitioned Roosevelt by letter for individual cases. He remained supportive of the program. In 1933 massive amounts of money were being spent on relief by federal, state, and local agencies.¹⁶ The CCC helped to transfer some of that relief into work relief.

Leaving New York State was a new experience for many local, small town men. A *Watertown Daily Times* article (January 5, 1934) about a man from Carthage, New York writing home from San Francisco, California, reflects this: "the camp is as big as Carthage." In the same paper fifty years later, John Hardy of Watertown recalled the wonders of the mountains of Idaho, and called it, "the greatest experience of my life." He would have liked to return, to see if any of the buildings remained, particularly as he helped construct them. Hardy served in the military during the war, and expressed gratitude for a government that helped him when he was in such desperate need.¹⁷

New York State had forty-eight camps in the Second Corps area including two for St. Lawrence County. These were the Benson Mines Wanakena Camp S-134 located on the private Powers property in Pierrepont, and the Brasher Falls Camp S-95 located on what is now the New York State DEC site near Brasher Falls. These camps were mainly involved in reforestation on state lands. The Brasher Falls Camp planted over 600,000

trees during the years of its existence. Also reported in a *Courier and Freeman* newspaper article was the building of a dam by the local CCC near North Lawrence that created a twenty-two acre pond for fishing. They constructed foot trails, fences, and fifty-three watering holes to fight forest fires.¹⁸

A number of St. Lawrence men became CCC members. Frank White of Canton went to a camp in Harrisville, New York. Years later he recalled being picked up in an army truck at the old County Home west on Route 68. His mother disapproved of his joining the Corps because she mistakenly thought it was charity.¹⁹ This was a problem with many American families. Although in dire need, they were reluctant to be associated with charity. Local welfare offices were logical places to recruit the men, yet it helped create this myth. This unfair evaluation of the program prevailed throughout its existence.

Leon LaDuke of Ogdensburg was a camp steward at the Brushton CCC. Another Frank White, also from the north country, was an ambulance driver. As in camps all over the country, they rose early, worked all day, returning to camp by late afternoon. Their work performance made a mockery of earlier fears concerning government free handouts to idle men.

The men had recreation facilities to go to in the evening if they so desired. Although it was a regimented life, most men fondly recalled the friendships they made, and the opportunities that opened up to them later in life because of the skills that they learned.²⁰

The local economy was helped by the existence of the camps.



SLCHA Archives

Interior of one of the CCC barracks at the Wanakena camp.

People were employed from neighboring areas as secretaries, educators, and other personnel positions. A telling letter in the archives of the St. Lawrence County Historical Association eloquently stated the plight of a college graduate who had been unemployed for three years. He was seeking employment as a secretary at the Brasher Falls Camp.²¹ Dr. Depiew of Canton was camp physician at Pierrepont. Walter Locke, who operated a dairy at Brasher, sold milk daily to the camp. Local businesses were helped as well when the men came to town on weekends. An establishment, called "Spanes," near the Benson Mines camp was a favorite of the men. In economically depressed times the added business was appreciated. As in most situa-

tions, when new people come to an area, relationships develop. Many CCC young men met and married local women.

Many men, some now with families, remained in the area, settling around Brasher Falls and Winthrop. Local people were entertained at various times at the Brasher Camp. An historical sketch in the *Courier and Freeman*, January 1945, mentions that the Potsdam Lions Club were guests in 1938 at a typical army chuck dinner. The following year an open house was held for local residents. When the camp was dismantled in 1945 the buildings were given to the 4-H Clubs of St. Lawrence County.²²

Elsewhere in the north country, there were two camps located in Jefferson County, as well as one

each in Lewis and Franklin. The Fishers landing Camp near Clayton, New York was under the direction of the Thousand Island Park Commission. The CCC men worked on state lands. Mr. Kendall, Clayton Town Historian, recalls how the townspeople appreciated the talents of the young CCC men who played baseball on the local Frink Ball Park in town. He felt the town welcomed the camp; they held dances, and some of the local women married camp personnel and still resided in town.²³ Mrs. Badour, who lived near the camp recalls that the camp consisted mainly of veterans and black recruits. She fondly tells of two army personnel who stopped by her home to visit her small boys, giving them candy. Fishers Landing is a small

hamlet so camp personnel were visible daily to local people.²⁴ Frederick Jackson, a resident of a nearby farm mentioned that his father delivered milk and eggs daily to the camp, and was also employed there as a cook.²⁵ Both Mrs. Badour and Frederick Jackson remember the camp fondly. They felt sympathy for young men so far away from home. They also commented on how well the camp was supervised and that it created no disharmony in the community.

William Miles, a former CCC member gives a lively reminiscence of his camp days at the Mannsville Camp. Although in his eighties, he recalls five barracks in a row with four men in each. They were arranged around a circle with a flag pole in the center. The recreation

room, clinic, dining hall, and other administrative buildings were opposite the barracks. The men worked on a state refuge near Lorraine and Redford in Jefferson County. Mr. Miles learned to drive a truck while in the CCC; that was his permanent job. He drove the men to and from work. He relates humorous stories of trucks being stuck in the snow, break downs, and sometimes having to return to base when it was too cold to work.

Miles is pleased that the skills of first aid and picture developing he learned in the CCC have proved useful throughout his life. He fondly recalls recreation trips to Pulaski and Watertown. A local ladies group from Watertown conducted dances at the camp two or three times a year. Although he

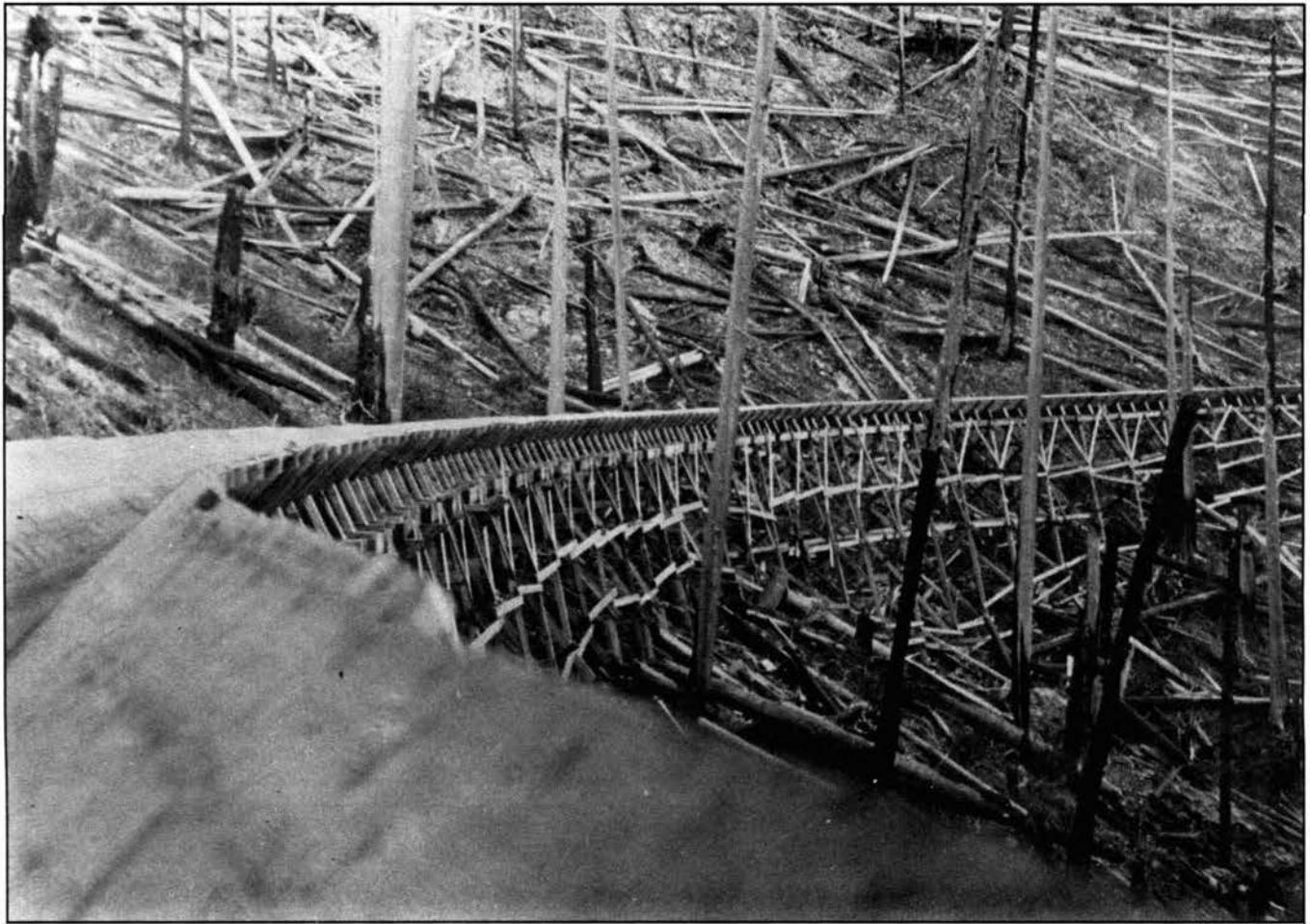
was issued old World War I uniforms, they were replaced with new green ones. Their old dump trucks, that repeatedly broke down, were replaced with new army trucks. A recent attempt to visit the camp was disheartening to him, as he found it in disrepair, beyond recognition. It was an important time in his life, and he expressed gratitude to a government which helped him when he needed it.²⁶ The condition of the camp is typical of most. Hastily constructed, few of the wood structures have survived the ravages of time.

Although forgotten by many, the CCC program was a success. It provided needed conservation work, while employing young, active men. It made use of a costly reserve officer corp. It promoted



SLCHA Archives

Lumbering activities at the Wanakena CCC camp.



SLCHA Archives

Lumber sluice constructed at Wanakena CCC camp.

and encouraged careers in forestry, as well as connecting many young men with nature. It provided economic help to families that desperately needed it. Most important, it renewed hope and restored faith in a number of American youth. It provided opportunity to people who never had it. This is made evident by remarks made by CCC member E.R. Reffle at a reunion in Los Angeles, October 7, 1982: "we were so poor, so poor." For the first time in his life he felt equal to everyone else. He had good clothes, a good bed, good treatment, and every one was equal.²⁷

There was a negative side to the CCC program. There was exploitation for political and patronage

ends. For example, in Indiana, CCC members were asked to donate a portion of their salaries to a so-called 2% club to build up Democratic campaign chests. In Mississippi, CCC men were given the day off so they could vote in the Democratic primary, although some of them came from out of state.²⁸ There certainly were many cases of business deals that attempted to defraud the government, some exposed, many not. Amongst the most famous is the toilet kit contract that Roosevelt's advisor Louis Howe unwittingly became mired in.²⁹ Although Roosevelt's \$5 billion addition to the work re-

lief program was needed, the timing could be seen as a preparation for the coming presidential election of 1936.³⁰

After the 1942 Congressional elections, the anti-Roosevelt coalition placed riders on appropriations bills that terminated the CCC. Its enrollment had already fallen to 100,000 men, with most able-bodied men joining the military.³¹ Future leaders would attempt to revive the concept in times of economic need. President Johnson considered a plan in 1964 as part of his War on Poverty. President Carter proposed similar legislation involving 200,000 people at a bil-

lion dollar cost. On March 2, 1983, the House of Representatives approved a bill (307-87) to create a conservation corps for as many as 100,000 young people. It was vetoed by President Reagan. As the vote showed, there was a growing interest in the government taking an active role in finding solutions for modern day "troubled youth." Perhaps there is again an opportunity for a visionary leader to apply the CCC concept to a program applicable for today's difficult times. A former CCC member, now a successful writer for a Los Angeles paper, recalls how the program gave him encouragement to go on. He questions whether it is applicable

to today's society of a technical computerized army. Yet his words, "a young man without hope is the same yesterday, today, and forever," sends a powerful message.³² Can a new CCC be of help to the large number of American youth who are idle, subject to drug abuse, and crime? As President Roosevelt said sixty years ago, can we afford to waste such a vital resource?

Notes

¹Michael Browne, *Our Country* (New York: The Free Press Division of MacMillan, 1990), p. 95.

²Ray Hoyt, *We Can Take It* (New York: American Book Co., 1935), p. 7.

³John Salmond, *Franklin D. Roosevelt, His Life and Times* (Boston: G. K. Hall Co. 1985), p. 62.

⁴Salmond, p. 62.

⁵James Olson, *Historical Dictionary of the New Deal* (London: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 18.

⁶Hoyt, p. 18.

⁷Olson, p. 82.

⁸Olson, p. 82.

⁹Olson, p. 82.

¹⁰Salmond, p. 30.

¹¹Hoyt, p. 30.

¹²Olson, p. 12.

¹³Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), p. 38.

¹⁴Olson, p. 82.

¹⁵David Elles, *A History of New York State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) p. 421.

¹⁶Ellis, p. 421.

¹⁷John Hardy, "Veteran of CCC Recall Work Project," *Watertown Daily Times*, July 9, 1983.

¹⁸Editor, "North Country CCC Camps to be Continued," *Courier and Freeman*, July 24, 1940.

¹⁹*St. Lawrence Historical Association Quarterly*, January 1965, p. 17.

²⁰*Quarterly*, p. 19.

²¹Letter, dated 1934. Archives, St. Lawrence County Historical Association, Canton, New York.

²²Editor, "Dismantling of CCC Camp at Brasher to Start Soon," *Courier and Freeman*, January, 1945.

²³Harold Kendall, Town Historian, Clayton, N.Y., telephone interview, October 1, 1993.

²⁴Annette Badour, Fishers Landing resident, personal interview, October 5, 1993.

²⁵Frederick Jackson, Route 12 resident, personal interview, October 12, 1993.

²⁶William Miles, former CCC member, telephone interview, October 4, 1993.

²⁷E. R. Reffle, "Veterans of CCC Praise Its Impact at Recent Reunion," *Watertown Daily Times*, October 7, 1982.

²⁸Morgan, p. 380.

²⁹Morgan, p. 44.

³⁰Browne, p. 86.

³¹Morgan, p. 64.

³²Jack Smith, "The CCC Spelled Hope to Young Men of the 30's," *Watertown Daily Times*, April 7, 1964.



SLCHA Collections 87-18.2

Photograph of CCC patch from Wanakena camp S-134, Company 229.

For More Information

For further background on local CCC camps, see two previous *Quarterly* articles: January, 1965, page 17; and "Roosevelt's Tree Army: The Civilian Conservation Corps," by Richard L. Rummel, April, 1990, page 16.

About the Author

Ann M. Fusco is a resident of Fineview, New York, and researched and wrote this article while a student at SUNY-Potsdam.

Murder and Mystery: Are Ghosts Abroad in the Land?

by Jean A. Young

Tales of ghostly visitations are as old as history. What may be surprising is that they are still reported, though usually in a “hush-hush” way, in the present day. It seems that if the secrets were known, every town must have its “haunted house,” where the occupants claim to have heard or seen evidence of supernatural activities. St. Lawrence County is no exception. An interested listener can hear many accounts, some vague but some remarkable for their detail.

Do ghosts exist? Are long-ago events in old houses somehow carried over into a hidden present? This article will not attempt to give the answer. You must form your own opinion.

In many cases, the spectral visitors are believed to be people who have met premature or violent deaths. There are some fascinating examples.

A large old house stands on the main road between Hopkinton and Nicholville. This house was built in 1810 by Eliphalet Brush, one of the original settlers of Hopkinton, who came from Vermont in 1801 with Roswell Hopkins and five other founders of the town. The farm originally had about 100 acres of land, and Eliphalet paid for it by working for Hopkins by the month until the debt was discharged. The

first winter after he came, he went back to Vermont and taught school, returning in the spring.

The property later passed to his son Jason, who in 1840 added on to the house, giving it the Victorian elegance it retains to this day, with its flying staircase, cathedral doors, and cast-iron-lined marble fireplaces.¹ This house has now been open for some years as a bed and breakfast by Jackie L’Esperance and her late husband William. But in 1901 a tragic event took place there. The home was then occupied by Mr. Charles Brush, no doubt a descendant of the founding family, his wife and his mother. A servant girl, nineteen-year-old Olivia Goodnow, lived with them. This young woman was engaged to a Nicholville man, John Griffiss. He had a rather unsavory reputation and was known to be a heavy drinker. Olivia had been warned against him, but she clung to the belief that she could reform him. She had told Mrs. Brush that her marriage was imminent, and that she would be leaving her soon. Griffiss had made a down payment on a house, but he had told people that “he wasn’t ready to marry her just yet.”

On the evening of Monday, March 25, 1901, Griffiss came to call on Miss Goodnow at the Brush home. John and Olivia joined the

Brushes in a game of cards. Mrs. Brush was enjoying some salted peanuts Griffiss had brought. The Brushes went to bed at about 9:20 p.m. Mrs. Brush was very drowsy, Mr. Brush was quite deaf, and his mother slept upstairs, so nothing was heard of the events that took place not far from their bedroom door. Mrs. Brush was later to wonder if anything had been added to the peanuts to cause her unusual drowsiness.

“It is an assured fact,” reported the *Potsdam Courier and Freeman*, “that the girl had submitted to a delicate operation about a week or ten days before...at the hands of some skillful person.... It also seems a certainty that at least two different drugs were administered that night.... Griffiss left the residence soon after 10 o’clock and after obtaining morphine tablets of a physician in Nicholville, returned. Previous to this it is supposed that the girl had taken some powerful drug, possibly of a corrosive nature...and that she had sent Griffiss for morphine to alleviate her suffering.”

On the following morning Charles Brush rose and went to the kitchen to start the fires and discovered Olivia’s lifeless body lying on a couch. He immediately sent his hired man to fetch a doctor, and roused the family. When Dr. Fortune of Nicholville arrived, he



Evert's History of St. Lawrence County

1878 engraving of the home of Eliphalet Brush, later of Jason Brush, Hopkinton, N.Y.

confirmed Olivia's time of death. The coroner and the district attorney were summoned, and an autopsy was performed the following day. The *Courier and Freeman* told its eager readers: "As the doctors progressed with the autopsy...they became more and more reticent as facts came to light showing the seriousness of the case, and at the close of the autopsy all that could be obtained from them directly was that foul play was suspected and that the girl came to her death by criminal means and perhaps at the hands of her lover." It was soon learned that John had returned home on Monday night,

hitched up a horse, and driven rapidly away. Later, it was found that he had fled to Potsdam, where he had taken a train to New York City.

Soon the town was in an uproar. In a large type, the *Courier and Freeman* headline proclaimed, "Girl Murdered, Lover Sought." "From the...position of the body on the couch," the account continues, "it would seem highly improbable that she died after Griffiss left, but was dead and partly laid out on the couch before he went away. The pillows were arranged smoothly and the deceased laid out on her back with no distortion of any part of the body. Mrs. Brush said the

deceased was dressed in red shirt waist, black wool skirt, red under skirt, and cotton under garments. When she first saw the body she noticed the girl's corsets, shoes, apron and collar had been removed. The waist was unfastened and outer skirt pulled down firmly over the limbs and tucked under the right knee, in a way that could hardly have been done by the girl herself, and the under skirt was rolled up about the body under the upper skirt. Mrs. Brush also discovered stains upon the skirt which she was positive were not there during the evening previous."

GIRL MURDERED LOVER SOUGHT

Little Doubt that Oliva Goodnow Met
Her Death by Criminal Means.

WHAT DOES JOHN GRIFFISS KNOW!

Officers Pursue the Man who Fled in the Night. His
Story May Solve the Mystery.

Headline on the Goodnow case from the Potsdam Courier and Freeman newspaper (March 25, 1901).

"On the supposition that Griffiss was with Miss Goodnow when she died, the theory of many is that the girl did not die in the kitchen or on the couch but breathed her last in the woodshed, where she had been taken by Griffiss, presumably to obtain fresh air, and was then brought in by him and laid out on the couch as best he could."

"The condition of the girl's clothing, which it is impossible to fully describe, leads to the belief that abortion was attempted that night. What the autopsy revealed in confirmation of this belief is known only to the doctors and officers. The position of the body, as above described, makes it seem

impossible that the deed was done by the girl alone. As near as can be ascertained...the theory of the prosecution is that the girl and her assistant...had made preparations for that night and possibly had prepared themselves with drugs and other agencies for the consummation of the deed."²

When the seriousness of the case was discovered, the sheriff and a deputy went to New York City on the trail of Griffiss. They traced him to Grand Central Station, where they found the ticket he used, the punch marks showing he had gone right through without stopping. There the trail disappeared.

It was later learned that after fleeing, Griffiss had written two letters to his mother, using the alias, "H. L. Smith." In these he claimed that the girl was dead before he left the house. The full content of these letters have never been published.

Given the niceties of present-day law, it would seem that if the event had occurred today, the charge might not have been murder, but more likely something like involuntary manslaughter, as the death was certainly not intentional.

Posters and bulletins calling for Griffiss' arrest were immediately distributed nationwide, but despite repeated assurances that he would

be found soon, Griffiss vanished without a trace.

But this is not the end of the story. Mrs. L'Esperance, the present owner of the house, believes that Olivia's ghost remains in the house, and has made her presence known on numerous occasions. The previous occupant told Mrs. L'Esperance that she and her daughter heard the piano in the front hall playing. They were alone in the house and there were no cats or anything else to account for it.

Mrs. L'Esperance also reports hearing sounds of someone walking around in the house. When she told her husband, a retired policeman, he laughed at her. But then one night he heard someone walking upstairs so distinctly that he got his gun and searched the house completely for an intruder, finding nothing. He finally admitted that there had to be a supernatural presence there.

This spirit has been known to turn lights on and off. One day Mrs. L'Esperance turned off the dining room lights, but soon found them on again. She turned them off again, but soon they were back on. This kept up until she said, "Come on, Olive, I'm tired. Stop playing games with me." After that the activity ceased.

This old house has a unique feature, a functioning bathtub made of copper. Always, after its use, Mrs. L'Esperance cleans and shines it thoroughly. If she does not, the water discolors the copper quickly. There have been occasions when she has cleaned it, and then returned to find discoloration that shows it has been filled again and emptied.

She tells that one time her daughter and son-in-law and eleven month old son came for a visit. The daughter awoke one night to hear the crib rocking and the baby talking away to someone. She pulled the covers over her head and soon the rocking stopped and the baby went to sleep.

According to Mrs. L'Esperance, there have been times when there have been guests in the house and "Olivia" has opened their bedroom doors and come in, and then left after a few minutes. None of them has actually seen her, but they have felt her presence. Mrs. L'Esperance believes she did get a glimpse of the back of her dress on one occasion.

This is one of the most dramatic stories told in the county, but there are others so intriguing that they invite great interest. Reported hauntings take various forms and come from diverse sources. Some appear to have been produced by overactive imaginations. Others are variations of old tales repeated over time and embroidered in the process. Some may be hoaxes perpetrated on, or by, those who report them. Still others may result from attempts to frighten children away from empty buildings. But there are many, recounted in seriousness by reliable people, that challenge our conventional beliefs and raise questions difficult to answer.

These reports are of different types. Perhaps the most common one is of hearing footsteps. Old houses, in themselves, are notoriously noisy, as boards shrink and swell with changes in the weather. Mice running and chewing through the walls can sound alarming to

one not familiar with them. But in some cases, they are apparently so clear that they have caused more than one family to move out of the house.

Another common story involves people returning home to a locked house and finding various objects moved around or sometimes broken with no apparent explanation. Some people report lights being turned on or windows opened or closed when no one was there. All these are harder to explain. The most striking reports are those of people actually seeing apparitions, usually fleeting, which appeared before them or brushed past them. Sometimes these are visions of people known to them, who have died, but often they are people dressed in clothing of the past. People also report sudden cold drafts in connection with these incidents.

Have you heard unearthly noises in your home? Have you seen fleeting apparitions, or found things moved around in an empty house? Many St. Lawrence County residents tell of such experiences.

To protect privacy, the names and places referred to, in most cases, cannot be given here. People do not want the publicity, they are afraid they will be considered crazy, and they fear that if these occurrences were known, it would be difficult to sell their houses, should they ever want to. Much of this story can only be told as anecdotes furnished by witnesses. But it is a subject with a long history of speculation, holding considerable fascination for St. Lawrence County residents.

Several years ago, on a Historical Association bus tour, I sat with

an elderly woman who, in the course of conversation, told me about the strange experiences she had encountered in her apartment in Ogdensburg. I believe the apartment was part of a house. She said that several times, when she returned home, she had found pictures and other things moved around on a shelf, and larger items had been turned around or displaced. Her door had been locked at the time. She had also seen in her rooms, on different occasions, a brief vision of a woman in old-fashioned clothes, who did not speak. My companion seemed to be an alert, intelligent woman, quite in touch with reality.

There are several types of accounts given here. Some are the "they say" type, old stories repeated among people who have heard them about a particular house, with no way to verify them, but of some interest. Some accounts were reported by people as told to them by those involved. Others were told first-hand by those who had the experiences. Some of these people came to me, as a historian, to find out about the history of their houses, in hope of finding explanations.

An example of a "hearsay" account is found in connection with a very old stone house in Louisville. Apparently for many years the house has been considered "haunted" by neighbors who claim that unexplained footsteps have often been heard in it. An old story says that in the early days a trapper who lived there left his wife and two children alone in the house while he was out trapping, and while he was away Indians broke in and killed his family. The footsteps are

supposed to be the children's. Another story is that someone was killed in the barn, and he haunts the place. All this is impossible to verify.

However, suspicious events have occurred there more recently. A girl who baby-sat there claimed that lights dimmed and brightened, and when it began to rain she went to close the open windows and found them already closed. Another story is that blankets were pulled off of a sleeping person by a spirit.

This house changed hands a few years ago and it is not known if the new owners have encountered any strange activities. This is an intriguing story, but the sources are too remote to validate it.

Some houses in which these mysterious events are said to have occurred fulfill the average person's idea of a haunted house, but others do not. Some are large, old and full of history. Probably as many are relatively small, undistinguished, and not always very old. More than one incident has taken place in an apartment, though sometimes in old buildings.

A case in point is a house in Norfolk, where the woman who now lives there has seen apparitions on at least three occasions. The house is a rather small, wood-frame building on a residential street, not unlike others in the neighborhood. As near as can be determined, it was built in the early 1900's.

She says she has twice seen the vision of an elderly man, in two different rooms. He wore a gray flannel shirt and baggy pants. His hair was white and he may have

carried a cane. The first time, she was surprised and said "Hi" to him, and he answered "Hi." Then he disappeared. The second time he was less clear.

She has also seen a woman in a blue, Victorian-style dress. She saw only the upper part of her body. The woman's hair was done up in a bun and she wore glasses. She appeared and disappeared quickly. All appeared at approximately the same time of day, about 7:15 p.m. The witness felt a cold chill when they appeared. She was not afraid of them and they did not seem threatening.

Research shows that the house was occupied for many years by an elderly widower and at least one of his two daughters, neither of whom ever married. After his death, one of the daughters lived on in the house for the rest of her life. When she died, at the age of eighty-six, another unmarried woman took over the house and lived out her life there.

Who are the people who tell of such bizarre events in their lives? Are they unstable, easily suggestible, or those who tend to let their imaginations run away with them? Are they attention-seekers or cynical pranksters? Far from it! They come from all walks of life, and they include teachers, professionals, and established business people, respected in their communities. Some would not allow their stories to be told here, even anonymously, so sensitive are they to public attitudes. Most shared the popular disbelief until they had their own experiences.

One interesting phenomenon has appeared in researching this

article. It is that women in general seem to be more sensitive to supernatural events than are men. Whether it is just that they are more accepting of "unbelievable" happenings, or more willing to admit to them, it is impossible to say. Far more women than men report such events in their own lives.

Another interesting observation is that most of the people interviewed say that they were not particularly alarmed by the experiences, and though there are sometimes reports in other places of harm or malicious tricks being perpetrated by ghosts, or poltergeists, as the noisy ones are called, none of the people talked to for this article seem to feel threatened. Usually their attitude was one of interested curiosity. It is as if other-worldly manifestations are caused by spirits who for some reason cannot or will not leave their former homes, often people who have suffered premature or violent deaths.

A classic example is related by a schoolteacher now living in Raymondville, a section of Norfolk, who tells of activity in a house she lived in some years ago on Route 11 in the township of Canton. The history is that a small child, about six or seven years old, had died on the property in an accident. On several occasions, while sitting in her dining room, she would plainly hear the footsteps of what sounded like a small child running up the stairs to the second floor. This always occurred between two and four o'clock in the afternoon, about the time a child would return home from school. She was always alone in the house at the time. The house has since

been torn down to make way for road construction.

Another story comes from Canton. It concerns an old brick house that was built about 1890. It was originally a farm house and was occupied at one time by a "simple-minded" woman who was eventually taken to a mental institution. When the present occupant was first shown the house, she had an overwhelming feeling of someone watching her. This occurred in several parts of the house, as though she was being followed, but she saw nothing. Later, after they moved into the house, they began to have episodes of lights being turned off or on when no one was present, and sometimes found the cellar door left open when they knew they had closed it. One of the daughters, lying in a twin bed upstairs, clearly heard noises coming from the other twin bed next to hers, as though someone was sitting down on it.

All the members of the family have shared these experiences at one time or another, including the couple who own it, their two daughters, and their son-in-law. They believe the spirit to be that of the woman who was taken away and died in an institution. The owner has since been told that the house has long been considered by people in town to be a haunted house, so apparently other people have encountered similar happenings there.

"I saw the apparition of a man dressed in 19th century clothing so clear I could describe the brass buttons on his jacket. The man spoke, but I could not recall his words two minutes later. He would not identify himself.... I seriously

wondered at the time if he were one of my Amish neighbors, until I realized that the Amish do not wear buttons."

This is how a woman describes one of the many strange experiences she has had in her old house in the town of Lisbon. She tells of other incidents:

"A painting fell off the wall three times, while the nail remained firmly implanted in the plaster and the wire on the painting was undisturbed. The painting appeared to fall in slow motion."

"There was the unmistakable sound of a body falling down the stairs, when every member of the family was in bed. This disturbance was experienced by all six people in the house, including house guests."

"There were several occasions of hearing a woman's voice and a baby crying. These were often dream-like, trance-type experiences occurring in waking hours during which the words, or message, were very clear but could not be recalled. As many as three people at a time have undergone this event."

"The memoirs of the son-in-law of the man who built the house state that his wife, the daughter of the builder, tried to drown herself in the cellar cistern, had been declared insane, and sent to what was then known as an insane asylum. The couple had an adopted daughter, and no natural children. This was during the Civil War when communication was minimal. The wife died there at the age of fifty and it was weeks before her husband was notified. His memoirs indicate that her body was returned

by train and he never opened the casket. Several weeks later, a family friend visited the asylum and, not having been informed of Harriet's death, inquired about her welfare. He was told she was upstairs and recovering. In his nineties, when he wrote his memoirs, Harriet's husband wondered whom he had buried."

"In other ways, Harriet remains a mystery. In the cemetery where she is (supposedly) buried, there are at least two and maybe three tombstones bearing her name, all with slightly different dates."

The present owner of the house says, "Of course, I now believe that the woman's voice is Harriet's and the crying baby her daughter. I believe the apparition of the man could be any one of a number of people. I am not unduly disturbed by these happenings. Some are pleasant, some are frightening; I would not seek any of them out. I am, however, convinced that it involves a sense not known to all individuals and I am honored to have been chosen."

It can be said that for some of the accounts in these stories, a natural explanation can be found. Vivid imagination, faulty memory, and assumptions that may not be valid can be blamed. But even taking these considerations into account, there remains a core of mystery that cannot be explained.

Fact, or imagination? Most skeptics will not be convinced by these stories. Most of us have long been taught that reality is what is provable by science, and ghosts are fictional creatures who float around in white sheets on Halloween.

Have spirits touched your life? If not, you are probably one of the great majority who look on such ideas as pure superstition or worse. Science demands a healthy skepticism, but it does not flourish in closed minds. Might it just possibly be true, as Shakespeare's ghost-ridden Hamlet said to his doubting friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

Notes

¹The Eliphalet and Jason Brush farm is depicted in Evert's *History of St. Lawrence County*, following p. 326.

²The *Potsdam Courier and Freeman*, March 25, 1901.

About the Author

Jean A. Young was for many years the historian for the Town of Norfolk and the Director of the Norfolk Museum. She now resides in Topsfield, Massachusetts.

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