

Frederick Johnson, Civilian Conservation Corps

In July 1934, Frederick Johnson of Red Wing enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps. Created a year earlier, the corps employed unmarried men who were American citizens between the ages of 18 and 23. (The age limit was later raised to 25.) Enrollees enlisted for six-month periods and were required to allot \$25.00 of their \$30.00 monthly wage to their families.

I suppose I was a typical enrollee so far as background, education, and ability were concerned. Most of us had dropped out of high school before getting a diploma. Few of us had any experience related to the task ahead. . . . It was a chance to work, and we were grateful for the opportunity. So . . . we gathered at Fort Snelling. . . . We were issued blue-denim work outfits, with a single set of surplus World War I woolens for dress. . . . In keeping with army philosophy, however, we did get well-fitted shoes. With a toilet kit for personal hygiene and a barracks bag . . . we were now equipped for the coming adventure.

Our destination would be Whitewater State Park in southeastern Minnesota. . . . The task for our group, now known as CCC Company 2709, was to improve and equip the park without detracting from the considerable natural beauty of the place.

Except for a fleet of dump trucks, the projects were completed with hand tools wielded by young muscles. As one might expect in any group thrown together at random, there were a few shirkers—goldbrickers, in the vernacular of the time. I think that the average enrollee was a productive individual with an interest in what he was doing and an inner appreciation of his contribution to the total project.

One can only speculate what would have happened to thousands of young men who without the CCC would have spent their early productive years in enforced idleness. The corps was not a handout; it was a fair exchange. At a time when it was desperately needed, we were offered the opportunity to work for the preservation and improvement of America. . . . The CCC member felt good about himself and what he was doing. In those difficult days, that was enough.



COURTESY JOHNSON FAMILY


Frederick K. Johnson, working at the Red Wing West End filling station shortly before joining the CCC

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In 2005 the Minnesota Historical Society launched a long-term project to preserve and present the history of "Minnesota's Greatest Generation," the men and women who grew up during the Great Depression and came of age during World War II. This essay is part of a series that spotlights the experiences of generation members from all walks of life. For more on the MHS project, visit www.mngreatestgeneration.org.

Comanche Drive In Bloomington

 IN THE 1950s, as suburbs underwent a period of explosive growth and the automobile became king, small drive-in eateries popped up along major roads all around Minneapolis and St. Paul. Most of these drive-ins had some seating inside but catered mainly to the take-out trade. The rapidly growing city of Bloomington once had several of these modest roadside establishments, among them the Comanche Drive In at 7801 Lyndale Avenue South. Besides A & W Root Beer (advertised in nickel and dime sizes), the Comanche offered such gastronomic wonders as “mad dogs” and “wild dogs.” It’s not clear exactly how these tasty treats differed, but patrons had other choices as well, including the eponymous “Comancheburger.”

In California, mother lode of the drive-in culture, roadside eateries of the 1950s often achieved a level of

such splendid vulgarity that they have now become beloved architectural icons. Alas, California-style gaudiness was rare in the Twin Cities, where most early drive-ins were simple affairs like the Comanche. Still, the Comanche did offer a small fashion statement in the form of a brick pylon rising above the roof. Similar pylons—generally used as signboards—could be found on many buildings in the 1950s and constitute one of the era’s architectural signatures.

Not surprisingly, the Comanche and its many roadside siblings tended to have short lives. By the late 1950s suburbia was already beginning to be imprisoned in chains. The state’s first McDonald’s, for example, opened in Roseville in 1957, and it wasn’t long before the old ma-and-pa drive-ins began to disappear. Today, only a few from the 1950s remain in the Twin Cities, Porky’s on University Avenue in St. Paul being perhaps the best known.

—LARRY MILLETT

Larry Millett, retired architecture critic for the St. Paul Pioneer Press, is the author of the new, illustrated handbook, AIA Guide to the Twin Cities.





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