

The Album

Times & Tales of Inyo-Mono

Being a quarterly recounting of the nature and history of two California counties

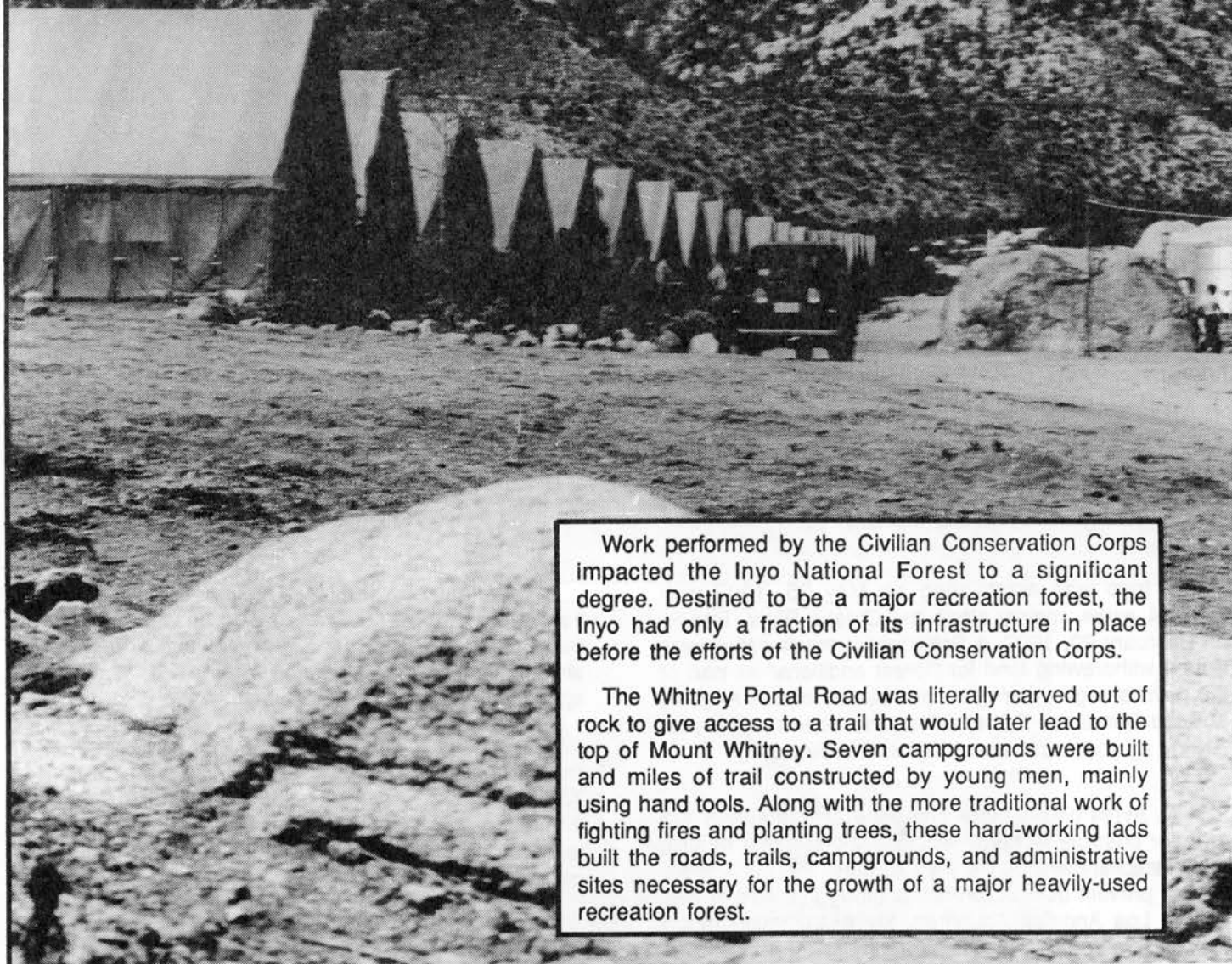
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INYO NATIONAL FOREST AND THE CCC



Work performed by the Civilian Conservation Corps impacted the Inyo National Forest to a significant degree. Destined to be a major recreation forest, the Inyo had only a fraction of its infrastructure in place before the efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The Whitney Portal Road was literally carved out of rock to give access to a trail that would later lead to the top of Mount Whitney. Seven campgrounds were built and miles of trail constructed by young men, mainly using hand tools. Along with the more traditional work of fighting fires and planting trees, these hard-working lads built the roads, trails, campgrounds, and administrative sites necessary for the growth of a major heavily-used recreation forest.

The summer of 1933, this tent camp was established at the site of the present Lone Pine Campground for Civilian Conservation Corps Company 2921.



A major accomplishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps stationed at Camp 2921 at Lone Pine was building the Whitney Portal Road from the CCC campsite at the present Lone Pine Campground to its present end at Whitney Portal campground.

by Emilie Martin

Inyo National Forest photographs

The Inyo was established on May 25, 1907 with 221,324 acres, mainly along the Owens River. Earlier, on February 20, 1907, a Presidential proclamation was issued withdrawing land for "forest additions" as part of the political tug of war between the City of Los Angeles and the Bureau of Reclamation over how to use water flowing off the east side of the Sierra Nevada.

R.W. Ayres and Al Redstone were sent to survey the area for possible withdrawal status the summer before. "The establishment of the Inyo of May, 1907 . . . were (sic) to prevent obstruction filings along the right of way for the Los Angeles Aqueduct. My examination report was a mere formality for the addition had been asked for by the city, the withdrawals made, and approved in Washington long before I ever got to the Inyo," Ayres wrote in a letter of May 14, 1943.

A year later, on July 2, 1908, an executive order transferred 1,350,537 acres of land on the east side of the Sierra Nevada in the Sierra National Forest to the almost treeless Inyo National Forest. A.A. Hogue was appointed supervisor of the forest at that time.

In response to angry letters and editorials from local residents, plus a change in administration, President Taft issued an Executive Proclamation which eliminated 270,000 acres from the Inyo National Forest, those lands along Owens River, and opened them to settlement on February 25, 1911.

The Inyo National Forest still had a very small amount of timber compared to the other forests in California. Its budgets that first decade were miniscule, according to the few records that can be found. Home Lumber Company in Mammoth was cutting timber, requiring the ser-

vices of a Forest Service scaler. Two small sawmills operated during 1914-15 on Bishop Creek, but that was the extent of logging on the new forest.

By 1912, the Inyo had 18 employees and 1,341,075 acres of land. It had a payroll of \$8,143 and a total budget of \$17,235, old records show. The bulk of the ranger's time was spent on grazing issues. Rangers were occupied surveying the boundaries of the huge forest and learning about the vast high desert and its mountain ranges.

At that time, a forest ranger was paid anywhere from \$60 to \$100 a month. Out of that salary, he had to provide the equipment needed for himself and his family. Rangers were required to buy their own equipment such as saddle, shovel, axe, and horse and feed. "Men Wanted, Invalids Need Not Apply," a poster advertising for employees proclaimed.

STEPCHILD OF THE REGION

Before the Inyo was established in 1907, the Wells Meadow Guard Station was the " 'East Side' outpost for the Sierra Forest Reserve each summer. A guard or summer seasonal would be assigned each summer from the Northfork Ranger District on the Sierra Forest Reserve, later Forest. Oldtimers recalled that the guys on the west side would always joke that whomever might get in trouble with the ranger the winter before would be the one assigned to Wells Meadow the next summer." (Henry Thorne oral interview July 6, 1989.)

"For many years the Inyo was only a spot on the Forest Service map. Roy Boothe, Supervisor for 25 years, told me the regional forester never made the forest an official visit while he was supervisor. Probably seventy-five percent of the mail issued in the regional office was headed 'all Forests except the Inyo,' " one retired employee said. (Robert Carlson)

When Supervisor Roy Boothe arrived on the Inyo in 1926, he found few roads, trails, or campgrounds. He came to the Inyo from the Sierra National Forest, where he had established a close relationship with Brigadier General Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Service, later in charge of all the CCC camps in California for the Army.

Trails would be constructed when some maintenance funds could be spared. Lawson Brainerd, Big Pine District Ranger from 1924 to 1929 recalls that his first job when he arrived on the Inyo was to find a route for, and then oversee, the building of the Bishop Pass Trail.

Brainerd wrote, "Supervisor Tom Jones informed me that they had \$3,000 with which I was to build a trail over Bishop Pass from Long Lake, east end of present trail, to King's River. The trail had to go over the summit, from Long Lake to King's River. We wasn't allowed over a fifteen percent grade. But we had no tools to measure that. My equipment was an abney level, compass and the little Forest Service handbook on trail construction.

The mountain Gods must have been in a generous mood, because among the crew was an enormous Dane. This robust Viking had that much desire and rare ability of a natural administrative leader. I selected him as Camp and Trail Boss which was unnecessary as he had already appointed himself to that position . . . He was such a help in laying out the trail and what seemed Herculean tasks to me, he would take care of on the way to work." (Lawson's log)

Having \$3,000 to build a trail was a special event. The following year, Brainerd was told to survey and build a trail to the top of Mount Whitney, in the southwest corner of his district, for \$1,000. But the money did not come through and it would be a decade before CCC labor would help to blast rock to improve the trail to the top of Mt. Whitney.

That illustrates how frugal the budget had to be. "The Forest Service worked a miniscule operation as far as equipment was concerned. You cannot believe what they got along with then compared to what they have now. When we first moved to Bishop in 1926 they had one big old truck and one pick-up truck," Helen Boothe Dixon recalled in an interview July, 1990.

Triggered by the collapse of the economy in 1929 and the effect of the Great Depression, the 1930s were tough times. Teenage tramps roamed the country; young people whose parents could not afford to feed them were looking for jobs or any way to support themselves. They had lost hope, and lost faith in the United States. The national landscape had suffered from abuse and decades of neglect and exploitation. Federal agencies managing the land were grossly underfunded.

When President Franklin Roosevelt was inaugurated on March 3, 1933 he created a novel program to heal both the resource problems and the country's human problems. The Emergency Conservation Work Act was passed by Congress and on his desk by March 31, 1933. Goals of the act were to provide 1) relief of an acute condition of widespread distress and unemployment in the nation, and 2) restoration of the nation's depleted natural resources.

When President Roosevelt signed the legislation authorizing the Civilian Conservation Corp., the ink was barely dry on the bill before Boothe was called to San Francisco to plan for CCC camps on the Inyo. The bill was signed March 31, 1933; CCC camps were operating at Rock Creek, Mammoth Lakes, and Lone Pine by June of 1933, forest records show.

The Department of Army was in charge of logistics and the camps, the state welfare agencies enrolled the workers and the Departments of Agriculture and Interior served as technical advisors. This meant that employees of the forest or park would come in each morning, take a crew, or cadre, as they were called, out to a site and supervise the work project.



This photo shows the rugged terrain over which the CCC crews built the Whitney Portal Road. A combination of primitive tractors and individual labor resulted in access for automobiles to the 8,300 foot elevation in the Sierra Nevada west of Lone Pine.

The Civilian Conservation Corps was acclaimed by many public leaders as the greatest welfare organization in the Federal government. It was labeled an economic and social success as far as strengthening families, providing young men with a way to earn some dollars, contribute to their families' maintenance and perform some needed work. Only later was the resource and conservation work performed by the CCC recognized.

In California in 1941, 79 CCC camps celebrated the CCC's eighth anniversary. Two of those camps were located on what is now the Inyo National Forest. Coleville on the Mono National Forest provided cadres of CCC workers to Gull Lake, Lee Vining, and Mammoth Lakes. An established CCC camp at Lone Pine provided workers for Big Pine, Bishop, and Mammoth spike camp.

THE LONE PINE CAMP

Inyo's main camp F-98, for Company 2921, was established in Lone Pine in the spring of 1933. Later, perhaps by 1937, the Lone Pine camp was moved to the Isabella Camp F-102 in January and spend the cold six months there before returning in June. That first year the Lone Pine Camp was home to 200 young men from CCC Camp 526 in Columbus, Ohio. An advance group of 20 men was "chosen to prepare a site for the balance of our company — 180 more to arrive in about two weeks. We arrived at the Lone Pine railroad station early in the day and were struck by the beauty of the mountains," wrote George Basich.

First the group built a temporary campsite with tents on wooden platforms with the majestic Sierra as back-

drop. The CCC camp was located eight miles west of Lone Pine, along the road that led to Hunter Flat. Today, that is the site of the Lone Pine Campground. "The first month or so we worked long hours. We built one large mess hall and three barracks under the supervision of outside contractors," Basich wrote. By 1936, when Slim L. Bush was assigned to the camp, it had been enlarged to four barracks and five other smaller buildings.

As the camp buildings were finished, the original CCC boys were sent out to work at other places on the forest.

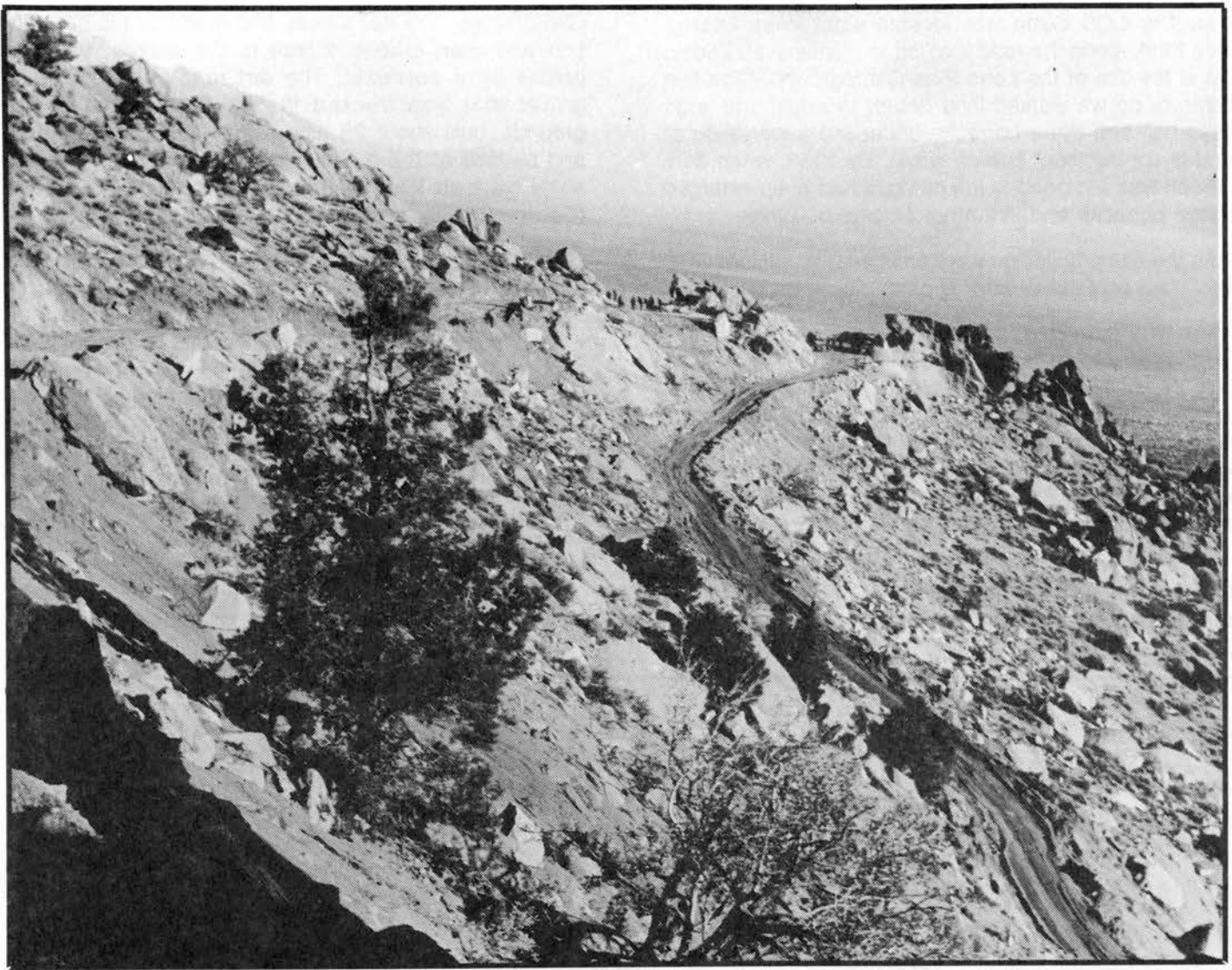
"As time permitted, men were transferred to forestry supervision and to 'spike camps' out in the fields. One gang of 20 men went up to Little Onion Valley for trail work and campground cleanup. They also helped fight a nearby forest fire. Another gang of 20 men started to work on a new road up to the campgrounds between the two waterfalls on Big Pine Creek. We pitched our tents first, and then got down to work with a surveyor, a Mr.

Glendenning. We set stakes and grade to his satisfaction and then graded a trail to the stakes, followed behind by a bulldozer. The dirt road was topped by gravel that was trucked in. We policed the campgrounds, built about 25 new picnic tables and repaired and painted all the outhouses in the area. We also did some work on the trails leading to the glaciers above." (George Basich, Inyo Register, April 2, 1989)

But the biggest effort of the CCC camp at Lone Pine had to be building the Whitney Portal Road. Leo D. Thompson was shipped with Company 526 from Fort Knox, Kentucky to Lone Pine at the end of May in 1933. He describes his work: "Our main job was road building. We first widened the trail in the canyon so that the trucks could get in and out of camp. We then built a road out into the desert to circle the arroyo that cut in the canyon. This road was about 10 miles I would say. It went right to the foothills of the Sierras.

Called a Fresno scraper, this primitive tractor was used to construct the Whitney Portal Road by the Civilian Conservation Corps. One man drove the tractor-like vehicle, which pulled a grader-scraper. The man sitting on the scraper steered it from his perch.





A rough dirt road winds its way up the steep hillside with the Owens Valley in the background.

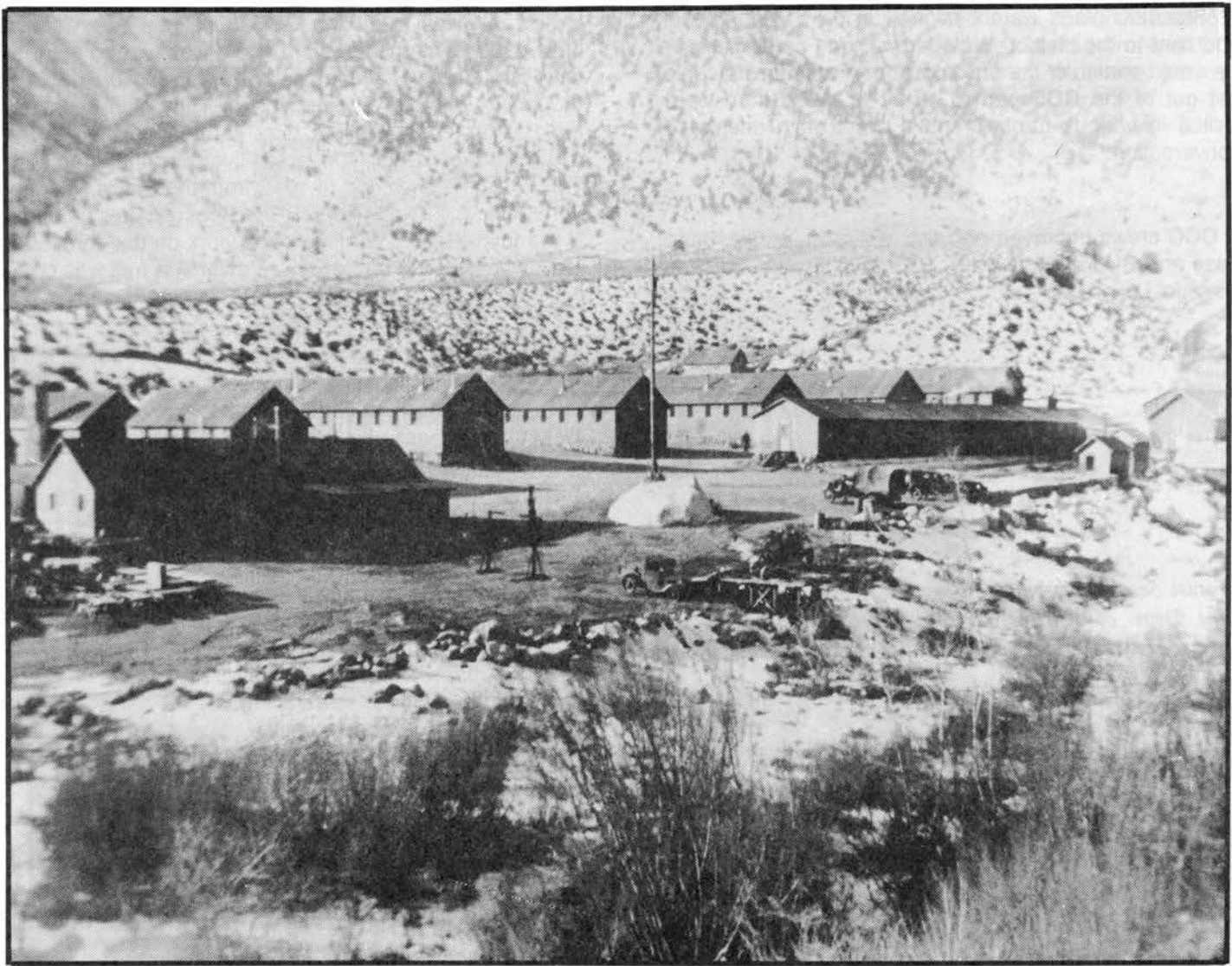
"Then we cut into the canyon itself. This was the hard part because it was practically straight down. We blasted and bulldozed a 30-foot road down the wall of the canyon, it took us about 3 months to do it . . . After reaching the bottom of the canyon we then built a bridge across the Lone Pine Creek, this was quite a job. Most of our materials came from the immediate surroundings. Cement and reinforcing rods were brought in by truck. We cut our own timber, the sand and rock all came from on-site (the bridge site). Then we started to build a road into the Sierras themselves. That was (our) last project and we were all quite proud of it when we left." (Leo D. Thompson, 1989 interview.)

A quote from a camp newspaper, called Hi-Lo Inyo Echo, dated August 10, 1935 illustrates what spike camp was all about. "Bearded Prophets Return from Whitney Spike Camp," read the headline., "Appearing as though a group of disciples of the House of David, ten

men wearily trekked into camp Thursday afternoon, August first, after a two week stay at Mt. Whitney spike camp. Unshaven, sunburned, and much the worse for wear, the fellows were glad to return to Camp and civilization."

The newspaper noted, "Cadre Leaves to Establish Mammoth Spike Camp. Starting the week of July 28, 25 men left to establish a spike camp at Mammoth Lakes, where road and trail work is to be done, and a series of concrete dams is to be built."

One cadre from Lone Pine CCC camp in 1933 was assigned to a base camp up Big Pine Creek. According to a conversation with George Basich, they camped three blocks from Glacier Lodge. Their projects were supervised by Mr. Fields and Mr. Barrett from the Forest Service. They cleaned up the campgrounds, painted latrines, cleared trails and chopped wood. "The job was to get young men working. We were all 18 and 19 years



By 1936, four barracks, a mess hall, a library and officer quarters were constructed at the site of the present Lone Pine Campground. About 200 enlistees were housed at the camp. Their major work project was building the road to Whitney Portal and then improving a trail to the top of 14,495 foot Mount Whitney.

old, never been away from home. We even worked on our days off, but sometimes we went fishing, too," he recalled.

BISHOP AND VICINITY PROJECTS

Inyo National Forest did not own any land at Bishop for shops or a ranger station until 1935, when the forest purchased five acres for an administrative site from the City of Los Angeles for \$60.00. The deed was dated May 2, 1936 and reserved all water rights to the City of Los Angeles.

It is interesting that this date coincides with the Civilian Conservation Corps work on the Inyo, as does the acquisition of the ranger station site in Lone Pine. Most likely, a local contractor was hired under the W.P.A. program to build first a warehouse in 1938 and then later a house, which was occupied by the Roy Boothe

family in 1941, according to Forrest Boothe and Helen Boothe Dixon, Roy's son and daughter. CCC crews most likely assisted with the work. This was common operating procedure in those days, according to Del Fausett, who started his career with the CCC and later was range manager on the Inyo from 1943 to 1962.

"The CCC built ranger stations all over California, hundreds of them. Almost every forest got new ranger stations, including a warehouse. The beams for the warehouse were steel trusses, shipped in from the place they had been manufactured. At the region level, they would purchase a large amount of building materials, and then send them out to the forests. Lumber was pre-cut redwood. At Lake Arrowhead the materials came from Los Angeles, I don't know where those for the Inyo came from. (Most likely from Stockton, according to Henry Thorne.)

"Standard plans were designed at the regional level and sent to the district. We'd hire a head carpenter and he would construct the building with what labor he could get out of the CCC camps. A lot of those men were skilled in various trades," said Fausett in a telephone conversation.

CCC crews improved and finished work on the Piute Pass and Bishop Pass trails. Packer Walt Schober and his wife Lou recall getting the contract to pack in the

crew's supplies when the CCC built trail. "We packed quite a little dynamite to them and it was a good start for the Piute Trail," Schober stated. He recalled about 20 CCC boys camped at North Lake. They also improved the Bishop Pass Trail, a vital connecting link to the middle fork of the San Joaquin River and the John Muir Trail, which was started in 1918 from the Sierra National Forest under the direction of Roy Boothe. After he came to the Inyo, Boothe continued the work on the John Muir Trail, with the help of the CCC crews. The trail was completed in 1939. ✧

Next issue: The account of work performed by the Civilian Conservation Corp at Mammoth Lakes and Lee Vining.

Forest Service personnel survey the work done by the Civilian Conservation Corps men along the Whitney Portal Road. The Dept. of Army supervised the CCC camp and provided logistics for the camp. Inyo National Forest personnel supervised the crews working on the road each day and returned them to camp each night.

