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CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION CORPS

Happy Birthday Conservation Corps



BY [CONAN NOLAN](#) // THURSDAY, NOV 3, 2011 AT 11:16 PDT |

Outside Madrid Middle School, in El Monte, in the back amidst overgrown brush, debris and a blighted wall, they celebrate.

Not with a party, but with labor.

This is how 115 members of the California Conservation Corps remember a birthday.

In this case, their own. They are cleaning up the place

It was 35 years ago when a young Gov. Jerry Brown gave birth to the CCC, a program patterned after the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal.

Brown said he wanted something for young people that was a combination of a “Jesuit seminary, Israeli kibbutz and Marine boot camp.”

This was Brown’s new incarnation of a group his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, established called the “California Ecology Corps” which served as an alternative service option for conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War.

The CCC’s mission was simply to help the state and its residents with the grunt work following fires, floods, earthquakes and even riots.

When there wasn't a calamity they sought out jobs that needed to be done. “Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions... and more!” was the marketing pitch. More than 115,000 young men and women signed up.

There was no greater bi-partisan idea than this. The CCC was a pilot program under Brown but it was the Republican governor who followed, George Deukmejian, who made it permanent.

President George W. Bush said the program should be duplicated in other states.

And then there was Jerry's first CCC director.

B.T. Collins was a Green Beret in Vietnam who lost an arm and a leg in a grenade attack. You would be hard pressed to find an individual as different from his boss as Collins was from Brown.

But the conservative Republican war hero and the one time seminarian Democrat liked each other. And Collins loved the CCC.

B.T. will forever be remembered for the day he drank a beaker of a pesticide (malathion) to demonstrate to his corps members that it was safe (this during the Mediterranean Fruit Fly infestation).

Brown later used the corps director as a foil against the legislature, making him his chief of staff.

Collins went on to serve in the state Assembly. He died of a heart attack while in office at age 52.

As with any movement of consequence, his efforts outlive him. The CCC workers are not lionized as heroes like fire fighters or police. There are no hefty overtime payments or pensions.

But there is a lot to be said for young people interested in getting into the muck and taking home the satisfaction of a job well done.

No doubt our governor wishes a few of his second-term ideas could inspire a similar legacy.

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