

The Story of the 517th Company

The Civilian Conservation Corps was established in 1933 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as one of the first programs in the New Deal. The CCC was designed as a work program for young men from 18 to 25. The young men would sign up for a renewable six month term in which they would work on projects mostly related to land management and park construction. They received a \$30 per month stipend, \$25 of which was sent home to their families. A number of Indiana's State Parks were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC was and remains one of the most popular programs of the New Deal.

The 517th Company of the Civilian Conservation Corps was established in 1934. After training at Fort Knox, Kentucky the 517th was stationed in Corydon at Camp Wyandotte from May, 1934 to October, 1937. From there the company moved to South Bend for two years and then on to Portland in eastern Indiana for its final two years. The company finally disbanded in 1941 as the country turned its attention toward the escalating conflict in Europe. While at Camp Wyandotte, the 517th graded roads, built stone walls, planted many trees, and constructed buildings that still stand today. The 517th even helped victims of the devastating 1937 flood that impacted many of Indiana's Ohio River communities.

But it wasn't all conservation work for the CCC. The men not only learned valuable trade skills, they received an education in the classroom as well. The young men took classes on a variety of topics including mechanical drawing, typing, foreign languages, and art. There were extracurricular activities as well, including boxing, debating, and a singing quartet.

Indiana had fifty-six CCC companies, eight of which were African American. Despite wording in the legislation that created the CCC that disallowed discrimination, the program was segregated based on race because of the prevailing racial attitudes of the day. The 517th, which had about two hundred and fifty men, was the largest and most enduring of Indiana's African-American companies. Other African-American companies were stationed in Bloomington, Mitchell, Evansville, Cromwell and several other locations throughout the state.



Image courtesy Frank Wilson

A CCC worker posing by a truck loaded with trees for planting

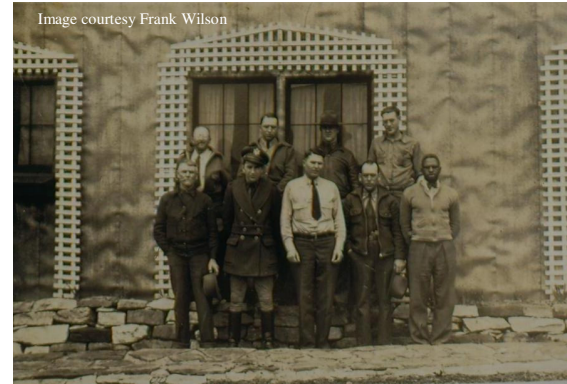


Image courtesy Frank Wilson

The leaders of 517th Company at Camp Wyandotte

Come and see history at
O'Bannon Woods State Park
7234 Old Forest Road SW
Corydon, IN 47112
812.738.8232

Questions or Comments?
Benjamin Clark, M.A.

Chief of Cultural Resources
DNR Division of State Parks and Reservoirs
402 W. Washington Room W298
Indianapolis, IN 46204
317.694.5111 (cell)
317.234.6442 (office)
bclark@dnr.in.gov

Further reading:

-“A Remembrance of the CCC,” the Commercial Review, Portland, Indiana, October 7, 1994
-Robert Sander, “CCC Camp #517,” *Outdoor Indiana*, Vol. 59, No. 2, March/April 1994
-Benjamin Clark, “New Deal or ‘Raw Deal,’ MA thesis, scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/2009
-William Meyers Collection, Indiana Historical Society
-Civilian Conservation Corps Company 517 Photographs, Indiana Historical Society

African Americans in Indiana's Civilian Conservation Corps



**517th Co. CCC,
Camp Wyandotte,
S-86, Corydon, Indiana**



Indiana State Parks & Reservoirs
402 W. Washington Room W298
Indianapolis, IN 46204

www.stateparks.IN.gov

Frank Wilson's Story

After dropping out of school in the eighth grade, Frank Wilson saw the Civilian Conservation Corps as a great opportunity to work, so he decided to join Roosevelt's Tree Army in 1934. He was attached to the 517th Company and headed to Fort Knox, Kentucky to receive training. A month later he and the rest of the 517th were in Corydon at Camp Wyandotte.

Wilson started out as a laborer in the CCC. But after about a year, because of some cooking classes he had taken in school, he was transferred to kitchen duties. Wilson was sent to Fort Benjamin Harrison for special training. He also received a small increase in pay and the chance to remain in the CCC longer than the normal six month term. Wilson was with the 517th throughout its existence, from Corydon to South Bend to Portland.

Later in life, Wilson shared that he was unsure of how an African-American company would be received by the towns where they were stationed. In an interview in 1994 for Portland, Indiana's *Commercial Review*, Wilson stated that "there were 250 of us after all. It was an all black unit. And it worried a lot of the towns we went into" he said. "But it was a good bunch of fellows and I think we had the best reception of all in Portland." After leaving the CCC in 1941, Wilson worked for twenty-five years at National

Cash Register in Muncie. In his interview with the *Commercial Review*, reflecting on his time in the CCC Wilson said "I've had a real good life and it all stems from the CCC Camp. That was a good life for young men who were just on the streets when we started."

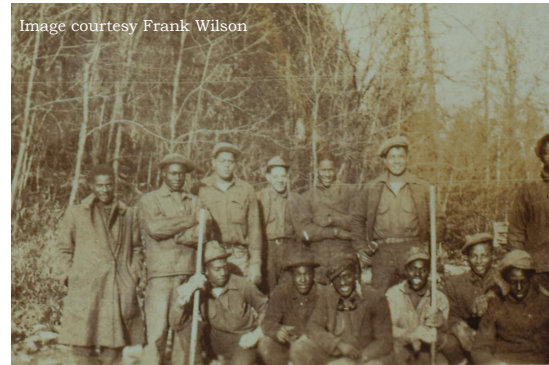


Image courtesy Frank Wilson
Frank Wilson and friends posing for a picture while taking a break from conservation work

William Meyers's Story

William Meyers graduated from Crispus Attucks High School in 1932 and after working various jobs for a couple of years, joined the 517th Company of the CCC in 1934.

Meyers showed a knack for leadership early on. He began as a laborer for the CCC but soon worked his way up to foreman. Meyers also became head of "A" barracks. For recreation, he sang in a quartet along with Frank Wilson and two other members of the 517th. Their singing group was heard on local Louisville radio stations. After his time in Corydon with the

517th, Meyers was transferred to Fort Benjamin Harrison, where he became a senior foreman for Company 3550. He was discharged in 1937.

Following his time in the CCC, Meyers enjoyed a long and fruitful career. After two and a half decades as an Indianapolis firefighter, he changed careers and began working for Indiana National Bank. Meyers was also active in civic leadership. He served as a precinct committeeman, was appointed to the Marion County Tax Adjustment Board, and was elected to the Indianapolis School Board.

In the 1937 edition of the Ft. Ben Banner, the CCC camp's newsletter, Meyers wrote an essay titled "What I Have Got out of the CCC Personally." Regarding his experiences, he wrote that "the youth of the United States had never received the best kind of training until the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps..." Extolling the education he gained during his time in the CCC, Meyers concluded his essay by writing that the CCC taught him "how to live—what to live for—and where to live best."



Image courtesy Indiana Historical Society, M0741
William Meyers and his barracks mates

O'Bannon Woods State Park

The area where the 517th Company worked was purchased by the Indiana Department of Conservation in 1932. Following the work of the 517th planting forests and building recreation facilities, the site became Harrison-Crawford State Forest. O'Bannon Woods State Park, established in 2005, is nestled within the 26,000 acre state forest bordering the Ohio River. The park was named in honor of then-Indiana Governor Frank O'Bannon, a Corydon native, following his untimely death.

The park offers modern electric campsites and primitive and youth camping in the nearby Stagestop Campground. Indiana's first natural and scenic river, Blue River, flows through the state park and forest with a canoe access ramp in Stagestop Campground. The Corydon Capitol State Historic Site is located near the park. Visitors can learn about early Indiana history as they tour the old town square and the beautiful first state capitol building,



Image courtesy O'Bannon Woods State Park
Property Manager's residence, built by the 517th in 1937