

Primary Sources: A Black New Yorker Describes Life in a CCC Camp

By Luther C. Wandall, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.21.16

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TOP: A group portrait of African American Civilian Conservation Corps workers at an unidentified CCC camp. SECOND: Reforestation Recruits from New York Arrive at Camp Dix. THIRD: Sergeant Joe Elliott measuring new members of the Civilian Conservation Corps in Camp Dix, New Jersey for shoes in 1935. Photos: Getty Images.

Luther C. Wandall was an African-American from New York City. He wrote the following account of a segregated Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, where blacks and whites were separate. The Civilian Conservation Corps was a government program from 1933 to 1942. It gave young men without jobs a chance to work on public projects, like planting trees and building trails in more than 800 parks nationwide. Many people lost their jobs during the Great Depression. The CCC gave them jobs.

Wandall tells about the first time he met "Mr. Jim Crow." Jim Crow laws did not allow blacks and whites to use the same restrooms or go to the same schools or hotels.

Government law said that the CCC had to accept men of all races. However, states ran the programs, and blacks and whites were often kept separate.

"The Civilian Conservation Corps"

I had heard many different reports about the Civilian Conservation Corps. Some said that the colored people got all the leftovers, while others said that everything was all right.

So I was pretty nervous when I read the postcard telling me I was accepted into the CCC.

According to instructions, I went Monday morning at 8 o'clock to Pier I in New York. There were, I suppose, more than 1,000 boys standing about the pier.

There were many colored boys. A few middle-aged men were there, who were going as cooks. A good many Spaniards and Italians were about. It was a good natured, lively crowd, typical of New York.

We were examined by a doctor, and then we were put on buses for Camp Dix, New Jersey.

"We Reached Camp Dix"

We reached Camp Dix about 7:30 that evening. And there it was that Mr. James Crow first definitely put in his appearance. A "C" for "colored" was placed on my paperwork. When we were put on buses, an officer reported as follows: "35, 8 colored."

But before we left the bus the officer shouted emphatically, "Colored boys fall out in the rear." The colored from several buses were herded together, and stood in line in the back until after the white boys had been registered and taken to their tents. This seemed to be the way it was at Camp Dix.

The colored were completely separate from the whites at this camp. One Puerto Rican was darker than I. He preferred to be with the colored and the officers looked down on him.

There were different kinds of officers. Many of them were Southerners, and when they were not working, they were usually polite, kindly and even friendly. They offered extra money to any of us who could sing or dance. On the other hand, some were mean and had bad tempers.



We were finally led away to our tents. And such tents!

They were the worst in Camp Dix. Old, patched, without floors or electric lights. It was dark already, so we went to bed immediately, by candlelight, and since it was cold, we slept in most of our clothes.

I now only had one thought: When do I leave this place? So you can imagine my feelings when an officer, a small quiet fellow, asked me how I would like to stay in Camp Dix permanently as his clerk! This officer was very courteous, and seemed to be used to colored people, and liked them. I turned down his offer.

The next day was a Wednesday. We were given army clothes and that afternoon we worked. I was on a truck hauling lumber.

Food at Camp Dix was bad and barely enough. For breakfast, we often ate boiled eggs, corn flakes, milk, bread, coffee, butter. Lunch was hot dogs, sauerkraut, potatoes, gravy, bread, apple-butter,

coffee. Dinner was bologna, applesauce, potato salad, bread, coffee, cake.

We stayed at Camp Dix eight days. Then we were put on a train, and taken to another camp in the South.

"This Camp Was A Dream Compared With Camp Dix"

This camp was a dream compared with Camp Dix. There was plenty to eat, and we slept in barracks instead of tents.

I am still in this camp. We have a radio, a piano and the main New York papers, white and colored. There is a little library, and all sports are encouraged. We have a baseball team and a boxing squad. An orchestra has been formed, and classes in various arts and crafts.

Our officers are white, of course. Our athletic director is colored, as is our vocational teacher.

On the whole, I was pleased rather than disappointed with the CCC. I had expected the worst. Of course it reflects, to some extent, all the customs and prejudices of the U. S. Army. But as a job and an experience, for a man who has no work, I can heartily recommend it.

This article was first published in the August 1935 issue of Crisis. It is the magazine of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP).



Quiz

- 1 Why did men hope to be accepted as part of the Civilian Conservation Corps?
- (A) They wanted to be part of the military.
 - (B) They needed employment and money to live.
 - (C) They heard it was a nice place to live and work.
 - (D) They had friends who were working and making money there.
- 2 Which sentence from the section "We Reached Camp Dix" BEST supports the idea that segregation was strictly enforced in the CCC?
- (A) A "C" for "colored" was placed on my paperwork.
 - (B) When we were put on buses, an officer reported as follows: "35, 8 colored."
 - (C) The colored were completely separate from the whites at this camp.
 - (D) He preferred to be with the colored and the officers looked down on him.
- 3 What was the author indicating when he added that Mr. James Crow made an appearance at the camp?
- (A) The black men were taken to their tents first when they arrived.
 - (B) The white men were excused from work to meet with Mr. Crow.
 - (C) The black men and white men were housed in separate areas at the camp.
 - (D) The white men and the black men were forced to share a bus with Mr. Crow.
- 4 Select the paragraph from the section "This Camp Was A Dream Compared With Camp Dix" that gives examples of recreational activities available at the new camp.
- 5 Why was Wandall's experience at Camp Dix likely different than the white corpsmen?
- (A) He declined being an officer and many of the white men were.
 - (B) He experienced segregation and prejudices because he was a black man.
 - (C) He wanted to be a permanent clerk but could not because of his skin color.
 - (D) He expressed interest in being a lumber hauler on a truck because it was better than being a clerk.

- 6 What is the purpose of the following statement from the article?

We were finally led away to our tents. And such tents! They were the worst in Camp Dix. Old, patched, without floors or electric lights.

- (A) to show that Wandall was used to much better living conditions than Camp Dix
- (B) to show how bad the segregated conditions were for black men at Camp Dix
- (C) to explain the first thing Wandall decided to fix after he got to Camp Dix
- (D) to explain that all the men suffered from cold and dampness at Camp Dix

- 7 Read the sentences from the section, "We Reached Camp Dix."
One Puerto Rican was darker than I. He preferred to be with the colored and the officers looked down on him.
What is the MOST likely reason why the officers looked down on the Puerto Rican man?
- (A) He came to the CCC from a place outside of the United States.
 - (B) He was not Southern like the other officers, which made him different.
 - (C) He did not appreciate the way that the black workers were treated.
 - (D) He wanted to spend time with the black men and the white men did not.
- 8 Which statement would Wandall be MOST likely to agree with?
- (A) Although he had been excited to join the CCC early on, as time passed it became clear that he would not recommend it.
 - (B) Although he had been warned that the CCC was unfair to black men, they were treated the same as white men.
 - (C) While the conditions and the food in the CCC were known for being very bad, they were better at Camp Dix than he had expected.
 - (D) While the conditions in the CCC allowed prejudice and segregation, it was a better experience than he had expected.