

## Civilian Conservation Corps 660<sup>th</sup> Company State Forestry S-79 or Camp Mercer

By Jim Bokern



**CCC Camp Mercer-along the banks of the Manitowish River**  
Manitowish Waters Historical  
Society <https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/4BDA7D9-00E0-4433-99A2-312890755565>

Along the banks of the Manitowish River on June 21, 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established 660th Company S-79, or Camp Mercer.<sup>[i]</sup> Driven by a sense of urgency to provide relief, recovery and reform to end suffering created by the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) launched the CCC in the New Deal's famous "First 100 days."

"He proposed to recruit thousands of unemployed young men, enroll them in a peacetime army, and send them into battle against destruction and erosion of our natural resources. Before the CCC ended, over three million young men engaged in a massive salvage operation described as the most popular experiment of the New Deal."<sup>[ii]</sup>

Wisconsin Conservation Commission documents reveal that 660th Company was one of the earliest camps launched in the first period of CCC camps between April and September of 1933.<sup>[iii]</sup>

### CCC Historical Context



**Manitowish, Wisconsin Depot**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

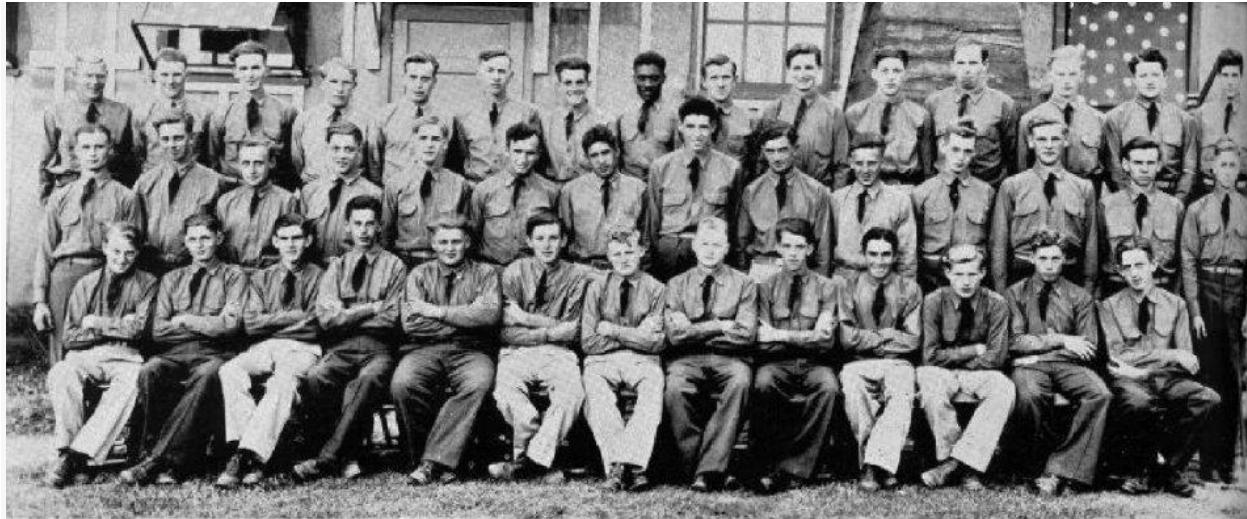
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**Locally**, 660th Company utilized the rail depot at Manitowish, WI to logistically support the development and maintenance of the CCC camp one mile west of the Iron and Vilas County line. 660<sup>th</sup> Company stands out as a larger regional administrative CCC camp, making railroads critical in moving both men and materials. Historically, some area residents confused the site of the North Lakeland Discovery Center as the site for CCC Company 660<sup>th</sup>. The Youth Conservation Camp, known as Statehouse Lake in Manitowish Waters, was created in 1962 as a separate state program, with a mission that paralleled that of the earlier CCC.

**In Wisconsin**, under FDR's New Deal, 182 CCC camps operated until World War II (WWII), which reallocated men and resources to battle the Axis Powers.<sup>[iv]</sup> 660th Company was one of 14 State Forestry camps in Wisconsin and was designated "S-79." Wisconsin CCC camps were tasked with one of four different missions: 1) Soil Erosion Service, 2) State Parks, 3) Federal Forestry and 4) State Forestry. <sup>[v]</sup> For nine years, thousands of Wisconsin's young men delivered impressive environmental and infrastructure results in a wide array of venues. In the Northwoods, tree planting, fire protection, construction, and stream or lake improvement by the CCC helped maintain the natural resources of the region.

The participation of Wisconsin minorities in CCC camps has a unique legacy. Wisconsin and Minnesota were among a few states where African Americans were integrated in CCC camps and not segregated.<sup>[vi]</sup> The closest CCC camp to Camp 660<sup>th</sup> was the Lac Du Flambeau CCC Indian Division Camp on Pokegama Lake. Wisconsin had six Ojibwa and one Ho Chunk Indian Division CCC camps during the New Deal. Indian Division camps operated differently than traditional CCC camps, expanding the age range of participants, the duration of

participation, and allowing tribal direction of projects.<sup>[vii]</sup> Importantly, the Lac Du Flambeau Indian Division CCC Camp was also an administrative camp and was featured in a 1930's Office of Indian Affairs film as an exemplary camp.<sup>[viii]</sup>



**Integrated Wisconsin CCC Camp, Elcho, Wisconsin**

Sparta CCC District, Sixth Corp Area Annual, WHS

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**Lac Du Flambeau Administrative CCC-Indian Division Camp**

Citizens for Education in Town Government, Lac Du Flambeau, Wisconsin

[http://cetg.weebly.com/uploads/3/9/7/0/39707378/1.9.15\\_s3\\_lac\\_du\\_flambeau.pdf](http://cetg.weebly.com/uploads/3/9/7/0/39707378/1.9.15_s3_lac_du_flambeau.pdf)

**Nationally**, CCC camps were a massive undertaking, targeting relief for American youth, support for families, as well as education and environmental stewardship. Women were prohibited from enrolling in the CCC, but were extended access to other New Deal programs.

"The CCC enrolled mostly young, unskilled and unemployed men between the ages of 18 and 25. The men came primarily from families on government assistance. Men enlisted for a minimum of six months.

"Each worker received \$30 in payment per month for his services in addition to room and board at a work camp. The men were required to send \$22 to \$25 of their monthly earnings home to support their families.

"Some corpsmen received supplemental basic and vocational education while they served. In fact, it's estimated that some 57,000 illiterate men learned to read and write in CCC camps."[ix]

During the first years of CCC camps, the monthly reimbursement was a bit lower, but followed the same guidelines for distribution. Even though the U.S. Army provided the leadership and oversight of CCC camps, weapons were not part of normal Wisconsin CCC operations. "The Ordnance property consisted mainly of .45 calibre Colt automatic pistols used in the protection of company payrolls."[x]

In 1933, America was at a crossroads, departing from Herbert Hoover's policy of "Rugged Individualism," and beginning a journey under FDR's New Deal, attempting to reverse the devastation of the Great Depression.

#### **History of CCC 660th Company State Forestry S-79 or Camp Mercer**



**Winter came early in 1933 at Camp Mercer**

Manitowish Waters Historical

Society <https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/A84C930F-0C2B-4677-B1DF-305010721668>

In 1933, the first men arrived on the banks of the Manitowish River, spending their first months pitching tents, clearing land and planning basic construction to prepare for winter. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Ellis and Mr. V. A. Moon,

Forestry Superintendent, the men of 660th Company overcame significant challenges in the construction phase of the camp. [xi] These pioneers of 660th Company were proud of the rugged conditions they overcame, whether bathing in the river or enduring zero-degree temperatures in tents. 660th Company history reveals that these young men, "...took it with a smile being ever thoughtful that they were doing something instead of staying at home and having nothing to do".[xii] Signing-up for six-month terms of service, the earliest men at Camp Mercer were revered by later enrollees as being "tough-as-nails." Their pride was evident, because they had broken the grip of hopelessness that plagued many Americans during the Great Depression.

660th Company was perfectly situated on the western edge of the Northern Highland Forest, and personnel eagerly fulfilled their mission as State Forestry CCC Camp S-79. "Camp Mercer, being situated on the banks of the beautiful Manitowish in the heart of the lake and forest regions, necessarily was assigned many and varied work projects." [xiii] Easy access to old Highway 51 (previously Hwy 10) and the Chicago Northwestern Railroad at the Manitowish Depot allowed 660th Company strong logistical support and quicker travel throughout the region when compared to other CCC camps.[xiv]



**1934 Forest Fire in View from Camp Mercer**  
**Manitowish Waters Waters Historical Society**

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/39BA6E7F-89BD-4B75-9F6E-815194009290>

CCC 660th Company's permanent status and large size and scope evidences its ultimate role as an administrative CCC camp that provided special services and oversight to other CCC camps. On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1935, 100 men from 660th Company were assigned to Superior, Wisconsin to create CCC Company 3663. The budding

CCC Company 3663 remained on the banks of the Manitowish River, preparing for the journey to Superior, Wisconsin until July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1935.[\[xv\]](#)

Our archives of 39 *Mercer Monitor* camp newspapers identify over 190 different Wisconsin communities that sent men to Camp Mercer. Virtually every corner of the state contributed men to this national conservation effort. Additionally, men from Michigan, Illinois and Missouri were enrollees at CCC 660<sup>th</sup> Company S-79.

By 1935, Camp Mercer became the headquarters for the 5<sup>th</sup> Forestry Subdivision District and housed a district commander from Sparta, Wisconsin. Initially, eight camps composed the district: Camp Mineral-Lake Marengo, WI; Camp Brinks-Washburn, WI; Camp Upson-Upson, WI; Camp Crystal Lake-Star Lake, WI; Camp Phelps-Phelps, WI; Camp Nine Mile-Eagle River, WI; Camp Star Lake-Star Lake, WI; and Camp Mercer-Manitowish, WI.[\[xvi\]](#) Later in 1935, two more camps were added to the 5<sup>th</sup> Forest Subdivision District: Camp Copper Falls-Mellen, WI and Camp Morse-Morse WI.[\[xvi\]](#) Likely, Camp White Sands-Boulder Junction, WI was also added to the 5th Forestry Subdivision District.

In early 1936, 660th Company was established as radio station WUGF. "...1936, four Clough-Brengle 28 watt radio transmitters were shipped to the Sparta CCC District for the purpose of establishing a radio net for the [\[xvii\]](#) handling of official messages and affording an opportunity for educational and vocational training for the CCC enrollees. These four transmitters were placed at Sparta, Blackwell,



**Camp Mercer State Forest Ranger Station 1933-34**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/DA70215E-2620-43C5-9C6B-054553207930>

Mercer and Cable, with the respective call letters WUGD, WUGE, WUGF and WUGG." [xviii] Again, the leadership at 660th Company was extended important regional communication and educational responsibilities. Signal officers were responsible for transmitting key information to the Net Control Station at Sparta headquarters. Camp Mercer's Glee Club, musicians and Forensic Club broadcasted plays and musical programs both from Camp Mercer on WUGF and Ironwood on WJMS. In October of 1934, the Camp Mercer Forensic Club created a radio drama of a typical day of fighting fires in the Northwoods.[xix]

All of the field activities and projects conducted at Camp Mercer were at the direction of state forest rangers. Interestingly, the activities of the State Forestry CCC camps in the 1930's and early '40's paralleled the work of the Wisconsin Department of Forestry from 1904-1915. Logically, the insightful work of Wisconsin's first State Forester, E. M. Griffith, provided a proven template of best forestry practices. [xxi] Consequently, Company 660's:

"...work project set-up at the start of the camp program consisted of: Thirty-six miles of telephone line construction; seventy miles of telephone line maintenance, 5,000 acres of fire hazard reduction, twelve miles of roadside clean-up, fifty-one miles of stream improvement; sixty-two miles of fire lane construction; and thirty-three miles of fire lane maintenance." [xxii]

At the time, fires plagued the Northwoods. Manitowish Waters contended with a series of fires in the Powell Marsh area that burned for years during the Great Depression and WWII.

Undoubtedly, 660th Company was one of the first responders to attack the fire-line, protecting communities and natural resources. Fires in the township of Sherman were also quite devastating. Manitowish Waters' resident and Camp Mercer enrollee Carl Christensen recounted his role in battling fires in the Powell Marsh during the fierce fires of 1934:



**Camp Mercer men holding the fire line**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

[https://s3.amazonaws.com/pastperfectonline/images/museum\\_936/002/2019246-1.jpg](https://s3.amazonaws.com/pastperfectonline/images/museum_936/002/2019246-1.jpg)

"That fire swept up to the Powell Road. We fought with as much as we could fight with to keep it from going across Powell Road because it would have got into Manitowish and wiped out

everything. ...And they called the CC's in and the commander, what we wanted to do was backfire and the commander says no. He says you can't backfire because that's not legal. We have to put it out. All them CC boys was walking around with tanks on their backs with a squirt hose on so they could squirt on the edge. That was all right putting the fire out where there was a little edge on

it. They couldn't get water. I was the only one there that had a legal blasting license to blast with dynamite. So what they had me do was blast holes in the marsh so they could get water. So the CC would pound up a hole and drill a hole down into the marsh maybe five or six feet or so and then I would load that with dynamite, set it off and then they would have an open crater there that would fill with water so they could get water for their tanks."[xxiii]

Company 660's legacy illustrates a strong focus on fire: prevention, suppression and restoration. "This camp has completed the following work during the period June 20, 1933 to May 14, 1937: Forty-six miles of fire lane construction; five fire lookout towers constructed; one million trees planted (Norway, White Pine and Jack Pine); lake improvement of twenty-one lakes; transplanting of fish; fire suppression, fire pre-suppression and fire prevention all season."[xxiv] To support both the

watch tower crews and conduct the regional work of Camp Mercer, three sub camps at Pine Lake, Springstead and east of Presque Isle on Oxbow Lake were established.



**New Rest Lake Fire Tower 1933-34**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

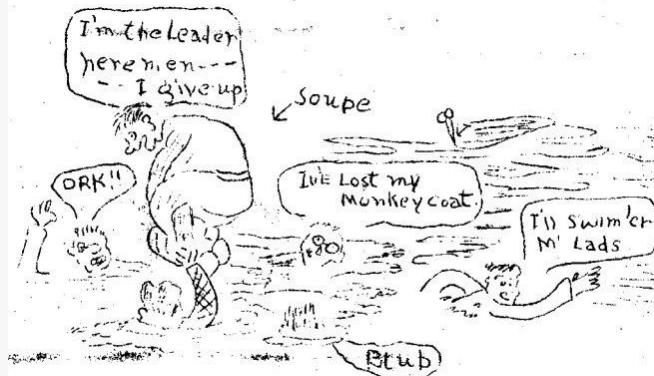
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These sub camps operated from late March until early December. Mostly tent camps, the sub camps were more rugged, and the men took great pride in their remote service. Today, fire towers, logging roads, mature trees, and quality lakes and streams are testimony to the long-term efforts of the CCC men.

In addition to traditional forestry projects, Camp Mercer engaged in fish rescue and fish habitat improvement. From 1929 through 1934, the Turtle Flambeau Flowage was suffering under a prolonged drought that dropped water levels as much as 14 feet. First, the surviving fish literally needed to be rescued by creating channels from isolated ponds to the rivers or by netting the fish.<sup>[xxv]</sup> Next, the habitat of various lakes needed to be improved. Fish cribs, gravel spawning boxes, and shoreline and stream restoration were all part of 660<sup>th</sup> Company's duties. This was especially true for the Springstead or Pine Grove sub camp.

A division of Camp Mercer also provided flood relief in the area around Anna, Illinois in 1936. In addition, they began cutting lanes for an 11,000-acre forest or game preserve just north of Camp Mercer and extended west to the town of Mercer and north to County Highway J. A fish hatchery and rearing pond near Big Lake and a rearing pond on Circle Lily Creek were completed in 1935. The *Mercer Monitor* documented the work of the "beavers." "Bill Summers', Ray Pripps', Ed

King's crews are working like beavers to build a Dam and Fish Hatchery on Rice Creek and will have it completed by April 15, 35. How they do like their job."[xxvi] The Camp Mercer "beavers" were busy. "Our dam and fish hatchery were completed ahead of time and is already to receive its quota of fish eggs."[xxvii]



**Cartoon, October 34, 1934 *Mercer Monitor*, Mocking Capsized CCC Men Requiring Rescue**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/media/8E3E8CFA-9CA2-48CA-B5BB-895054502913>

The Pine Lake sub camp did have a reputation of not rescuing turtles, rather making soup from these reptiles and inviting the forest rangers to join them in dining. Many other men hunted and fished while at Camp Mercer and when on leave.

Over the years, there were many calamities, which included vehicle break downs in remote areas like Moose Lake, capsized boats on the Turtle Flambeau Flowage (requiring CCC "boaters" to wait hours for rescue while clinging to old tree tops in white caps[xxviii], a dam blowout at the Circle Lily Creek rearing pond, the shower house burning down, and countless minor accidents involving trucks, cars and mechanized equipment. These events represent only a few blemishes on the record of 660<sup>th</sup> Company. Without a doubt, the greatest complaint from officers and enrollees were flies, ticks and mosquitoes.

Educational Programs were an important pillar of the CCC model. The Great Depression caused schools to close and/or children were unable to access public education for years. These educational gaps were strategically addressed through an array of CCC educational programs meeting the varied learning needs of CCC participants:

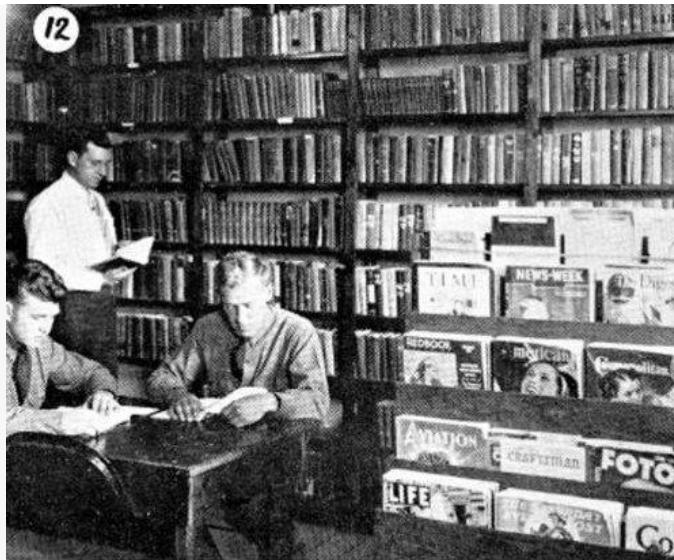
"In April, 1934... inaugurated...academic and vocational courses. The academic field consisted of elementary, high school and college courses with recognized credit at

local institutions. The vocational courses were many and varied. A few were: Typing, bookkeeping, agriculture, photography, leathercraft, woodworking, and auto mechanics." [xxix]

In May of 1934, a partial survey of educational levels at Camp Mercer revealed:

Number Finishing	
College	3
Number Finishing High	
School	51
Number Finishing 2 Yr. High	
School	24
Number Finishing	
8 <sup>th</sup> Grade	36
Number Finishing	
6 <sup>th</sup> Grade	19
Number Finishing	
4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2
Number Taken Vocational, Apprenticeship, Correspondence and Graduate work	18

Differentiated educational programs led to diverse outcomes for CCC men. Popularity of the educational programs at 660th Company was clearly evidenced in the 1937 Sixth Corp Area Annual. "The educational building has steadily grown from a meager eight-by-twelve-foot room to a full barracks, and has recently been revamped into one of the finest of CCC educational buildings." [xxx] Additionally, the 660th Company community published, "The camp newspaper, "*Mercer Monitor*," ... founded May 2, 1934. Publication has been made regularly ever since." [xxxi] Even in the earliest months of Camp Mercer, educational classes were available. As the camp grew, so did the educational offerings; and when Camp Mercer became an administrative camp in 1935, Educational Conferences for 5<sup>th</sup> Forestry Sub division District were hosted along the banks of the Manitowish River. Early (May, 1934) weekly course offerings from the *Mercer Monitor*:



**Camp Mercer Library and Educational Barracks**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/AC0DFE74-6144-4ECE-B91E-423617939711>

Tuesday

Mapping and Surveying

Football methods

Higher Mathematics

Athletic Program

Wednesday

Trouble Shooting on a Gas Engine

Agriculture

Arithmetic

Penmanship and spelling

Thursday

Athletic program

Personal Hygiene and First Aid

Business English

Higher Mathematics

Friday

Athletic program

Agriculture

Alternating Religious Services

Slides by Conservation Dept.

Sadly, the CCC was politically attacked both nationally and locally by opponents of FDR's New Deal. In 1934, the *Mercer Monitor* featured a defense of their efforts by offering "plain facts":



**CCC 660th Company Fire Fighters**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/D79389CF-00AB-4BBB-A9D9-031185127300>

"We who live at Camp Mercer and see the operation of the camp from day to day, feel that an injustice is been done given we hear our work criticized as is frequently done, and it is the object of the Monitor to make an effort to keep our readers informed as to the facts.

"A large percentage of the boys are engaged at present time battling a very dangerous fire, which would without a doubt cause terrific havoc with the small amount of timber the lumber men, of many years ago so generously left for those who followed. In this case of disasters forest fires, we ask any fair-minded person what would happen if we had no CCC boys and we are compelled to fall back on the scattered population for assistance and in many cases to save homes and lives?..."

"Starting from camp at 5:00 AM, grabbing a few sandwiches sent out them and at it again (and what we say at it again we don't mean maybe) get back to camp at dark,

sleep a few hours, and on the job again. When these boys are not fighting fires to save what little timber we have left in protecting the homes and lives of scattered settlers, they're cutting brush and clearing the land bordering the highways, which makes the stopping of fires more simplified. In addition to this work, fire lanes are being made 24 feet wide. A good turnpike is made, enabling firefighters to reach any fires they may be spotted by the lookout towers with the least possible delay. In many cases fires are reached in less than an hour after they are reported."[xxxii]

Local businesses benefited from the CCC men spending part or all of their \$5 a month going out on the town, particularly in the months of October through April when tourism was quite low. More important than the CCC men spending their money (less than 17 cents a day for their efforts) was the money they earned for their families which was four to five times greater.

Like today, political wrangling and debates regarding the role of government raged as FDR's New Deal created his "Alphabet Soup" reforms. But in the end, the American people elected FDR to four terms in office, consistently choosing direct relief, recovery and reform over "Hoovervilles" and "Hoover Blankets." Even though FDR's "Tree Army" of CCC men was popular, Northwoods camp closures started in 1937, and Camp Mercer was on the chopping block as well.[xxxiii] Athletics and outdoor recreation were other pillars of the CCC culture.

Additionally, 660th Company "...achievements include athletic awards received, including the baseball championship of the Sparta CCC District for 1936." [xxxiv] Early in 1933, construction of the baseball diamond was cleared to provide vital recreation for the men. Today, the baseball field clearing is still visible, with young pine trees slowly reclaiming the field where Camp Mercer baseball champions once played.



**First Camp Mercer Post Exchange 1933**  
Manitowish Waters Historical Society

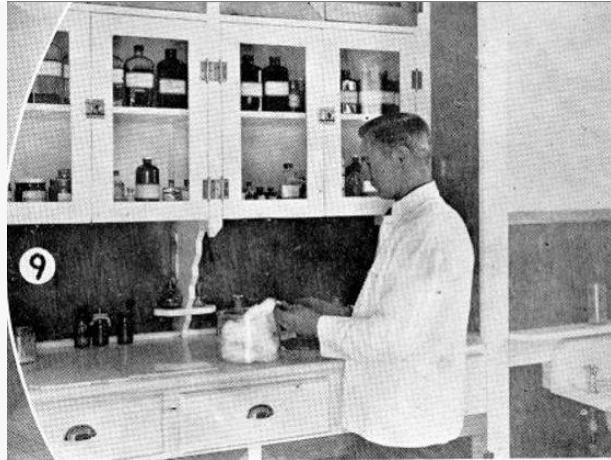
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In 1933 and early 1934, Camp Mercer competed athletically locally throughout the Northwoods, including at the CCC-Indian Division in Lac Du Flambeau, Mercer, Little Bohemia Lodge, Boulder Junction and Rhinelander. By 1934, the competitions expanded more to the north against CCC camps located as far east as Iron River and Trout Creek, Michigan. In 1935, athletic conferences shifted to the 5<sup>th</sup> Forestry Subdivision camps, with competitions at Camp Mineral-Lake Marengo, WI; Camp Brinks-Washburn, WI; Camp Upson-Upson, WI; Camp Crystal Lake-Star Lake, WI; Camp Phelps-Phelps, WI; Camp Nine Mile-Eagle River, WI; Camp Star Lake-Star Lake, WI; Camp Mercer-Manitowish, WI, Camp Copper Falls-Mellen, WI; and Camp Morse-Morse, WI. Boxing was a popular sport, and matches in

Ironwood, Rhinelander, Merrill and Milwaukee were especially featured in the camp newspaper.

Those not qualifying for the formal teams were strongly encouraged to compete by barracks in volleyball, football, kitten (soft)ball, basketball and sometimes boxing. Boxing also seemed to be a means by which disputes and rivalries were settled unofficially in camp. The *Mercer Monitor* had more than one account of CCC enrollees being pugilists to settle a score, much to the entertainment of the other camp members.

Recreational activities were often featured in the 1937 Sixth Corp Area Annual, showcasing baseball, swimming, archery, boxing, billiards, basketball, running, track and field, canoe jousting, softball and musical bands. In addition, church services were conducted at Camp Mercer, as well as more casual social activities, mostly at the camp canteen. Supplies and amenities were for sale at the "P EX," or Post Exchange, to provide the men with necessities. In March, 1935, beer was added to the soft drinks already offered at the canteen for refreshment. Proceeds from the canteen were used to purchase the men a washing machine. This was a tremendous upgrade to the washtubs and wash boards early enrollees used year-round.



**Camp Mercer Dispensary**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

[https://s3.amazonaws.com/pastperfectonline/images/museum\\_936/002/20199113.jpg](https://s3.amazonaws.com/pastperfectonline/images/museum_936/002/20199113.jpg)

Proper medical care was essential, considering the dangerous work and harsh conditions CCC men sometimes faced. 660th Company had a dispensary for medical needs that was manned by a camp surgeon. Camp Mercer's ambulance service responded to a variety of emergencies that befell the men. Sadly, some Wisconsin CCC camps were plagued with diseases like spinal meningitis and higher accident rates. [xxxv] *Mercer Monitor* articles entitled "Infirmary Infections" or "Dispensary Infections" were an important part of the camp newspaper. Articles focused on prevention through awareness. Maladies like the flu, measles, poison ivy, burns from fighting fires, venereal diseases, mumps, frostbite, pneumonia and injuries from a wide range of work site accidents were addressed by the medical staff. Serious medical conditions and surgeries were treated at Grandview Hospital in Ironwood, Michigan.

Romantic interests of the men are revealed in nearly every issue of the *Mercer Monitor*. Camp morale was seemingly boosted by both overt and covert teasing regarding enrollees' relationships. These men traveled far and wide to seek companionship, grab a drink and have a good time. CCC men's camp antics were captured in ongoing articles and cartoons, "Hermit Club," "Lovers Club," "Laffs and Gaffs," "Heard About Camp," "Humor," "Here and There," and many more. Teasing and celebrating the lives of their CCC brothers reveal the subjects of camp banter but, more importantly, gives insight into how young men coped with the rigors of the Great Depression.



**"Dianne" Camp Mercer Mascot**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/9B89E353-AD18-4A63-A22B-102880081114>

The CCC was a department of the U.S. Army and run accordingly, but men of 660<sup>th</sup> Company S-79 found time to have plenty of fun, too. "Rooks", or new enrollees, were subject to initiations, including snipe hunts. With most of their time spent in the field doing the work prescribed by the Wisconsin state forest rangers, CCC workers came in contact with abandoned baby animals. Camp mascots were an informal tradition. Most well-known was "Dianne" the deer, who was often requested by locals and visitors for photo opps. Additionally, the men of 660<sup>th</sup> Company also had a bear cub, rabbits, dogs and flying squirrels as part of their menagerie of critters. Fighting numerous fires each spring likely led to men from Camp Mercer discovering many animals injured and/or separated from their mothers. The private (unofficial) photo collection of Ambrose McKloskey also included images of CCC boys hunting and having beer parties in their barracks.

Unfortunately, Camp Mercer's tenure was not without tragedy. On April 22<sup>nd</sup> of 1934, 660<sup>th</sup> Company leadership sent Eugene Bosineau and company cook John Morris to Little Bohemia on a beer run. They were driven to Little Bohemia by Mercer resident John Hoffman in his 1933 Chevy Coup.<sup>[xxxvi]</sup> Unknowingly, these men found themselves in the middle of a standoff between the FBI and Public Enemy Number 1, John Dillinger, and his notorious gang. Just as FBI agents set a perimeter around Little Bohemia, the CCC men chose to return to Camp Mercer to complete their assigned mission.<sup>[xxxvii]</sup> Bosineau and Hoffman had been drinking,

but Morris was highly intoxicated and had just filled his flask at the bar. An FBI web page reports:



#### **Public Enemy #1 Camp Mercer Mix-up**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/4622F6E3-7909-41B9-A75C-571900483743>

"Three of them got into a car and turned on the radio and began to drive off. Agents yelled 'Stop! Federal Agents! Police! Stop!' But the men had been inside drinking, having a good time. They didn't hear the agents. And because they seemed to be coming at them in a threatening manner, our agents opened up fire on the car."[xxxviii]

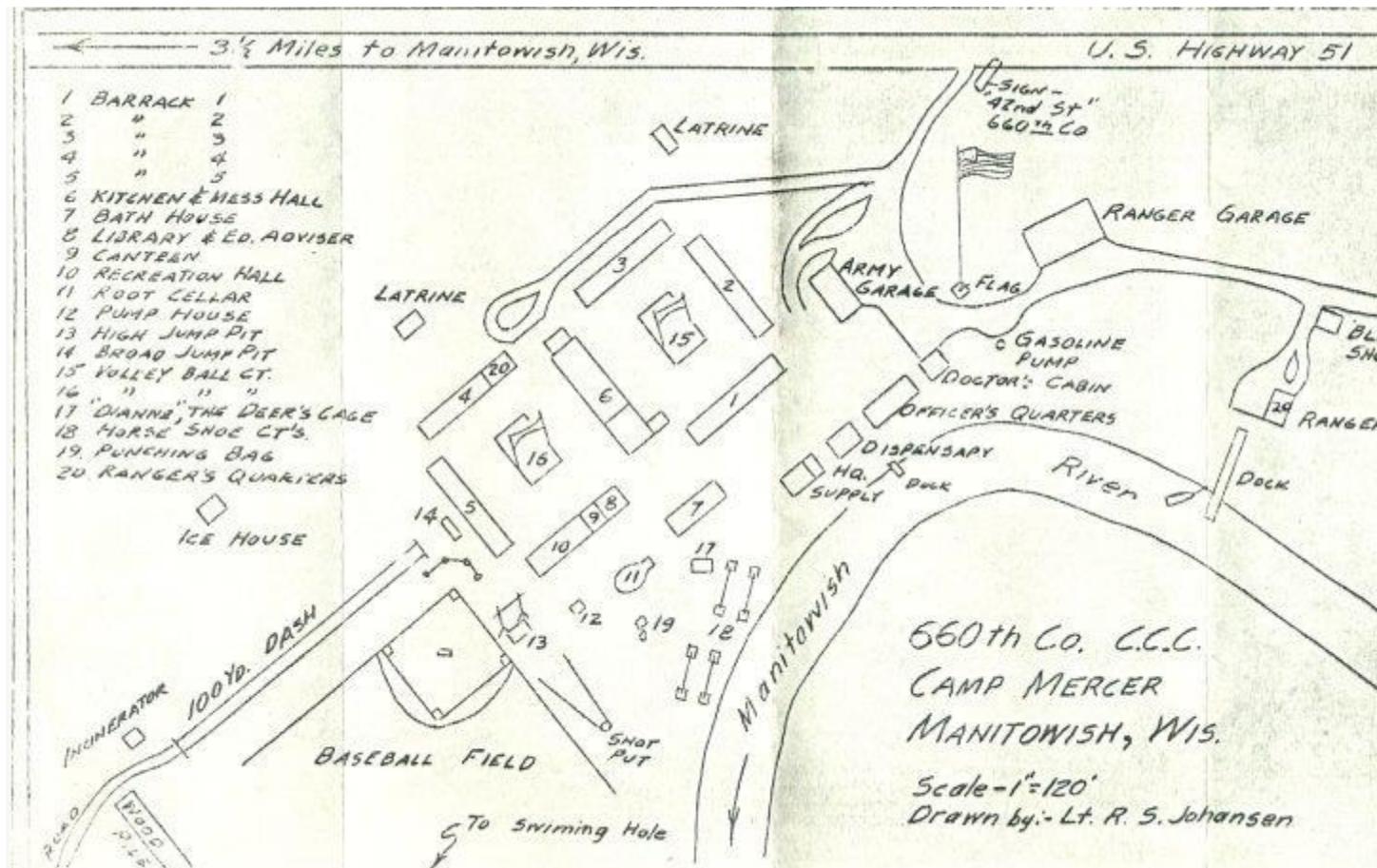
Morris fled the bullet ridden car, leaving Bosineau who was mortally wounded, to call Camp Mercer for the ambulance. Both Hoffman and Morris were also shot by law enforcement, but survived. The FBI's choice to open fire on Hoffman's 1933 Chevy alerted Dillinger and his gang, leading to a gun fight which allowed the criminals to escape.

Sadly, the most lethal member of the gang, Baby Face Nelson, fled a few miles east on Highway 51 to Koerner's Resort. Nelson was ready for law enforcement, and sprang on the two FBI agents and the Spider Lake (Manitowish Waters) constable as they drove into Koerner's Resort. Spraying the car with bullets at point-blank range, Nelson killed FBI agent Carter Baum and seriously wounded both FBI agent Jay Newman and town constable Carl Christensen. It could be argued that a Camp Mercer "beer run" directly impacted Dillinger's humiliating escape from federal agents and the FBI's failure on the ground, directly leading to a systemic restructuring of FBI

tactics and field operations in the future.[xxxix] Interestingly, less than two weeks later, the first publication of the *Mercer Monitor* was on May 5, 1934 and made no mention of the recent bloodshed at Little Bohemia. Understandably, camp leadership chose to direct the attention of Camp Mercer on their mission to support Wisconsin state forests and not on the role of “off-duty” CCC men who were tragically caught-up in a botched FBI raid.

### **Cultural Remnants Still at Camp Mercer**

Reconnaissance of the 660th Company site reveals several important buildings and features on the eastern portion of the site. When entering from the easternmost access road, the camp dump and the Circle Lily bridge barrow pit are on the left. This expansive feature extends to the marsh area along the creek and river. The 1934 Camp map marks a dynamite magazine or shack. There is no evidence of this structure, but the storage of dynamite would later migrate nearly a half mile west. A possible secondary site for the eastern dynamite shack may have been a dugout with wooden sides, sheet metal and a lightning rod along the Manitowish River some 30 meters east, before the DNR campsite. Remnants of an old road (from the turn of the access road) is mostly over grown, but curves toward the dugout feature.



### 1934 Map of 660th Co. CCC or Camp Mercer

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/archive/1076D528-3B61-4D8F-8728-270868258785>

Moving west along the main access road, another road appears on the left toward the river. Immediately at the turn is the site of the early blacksmith shop. Venturing south toward the DNR campsite and the river, the site of the Ranger Cabin is on the left side of the camp site. The Ranger Cabin remained until 1935 when the Mercer Ranger Station was completed. Returning to the logging road



**1933 Officer's Quarters, Dispensary and HD Supply**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/FE7B873E-B90A-4557-A253-648541803218>

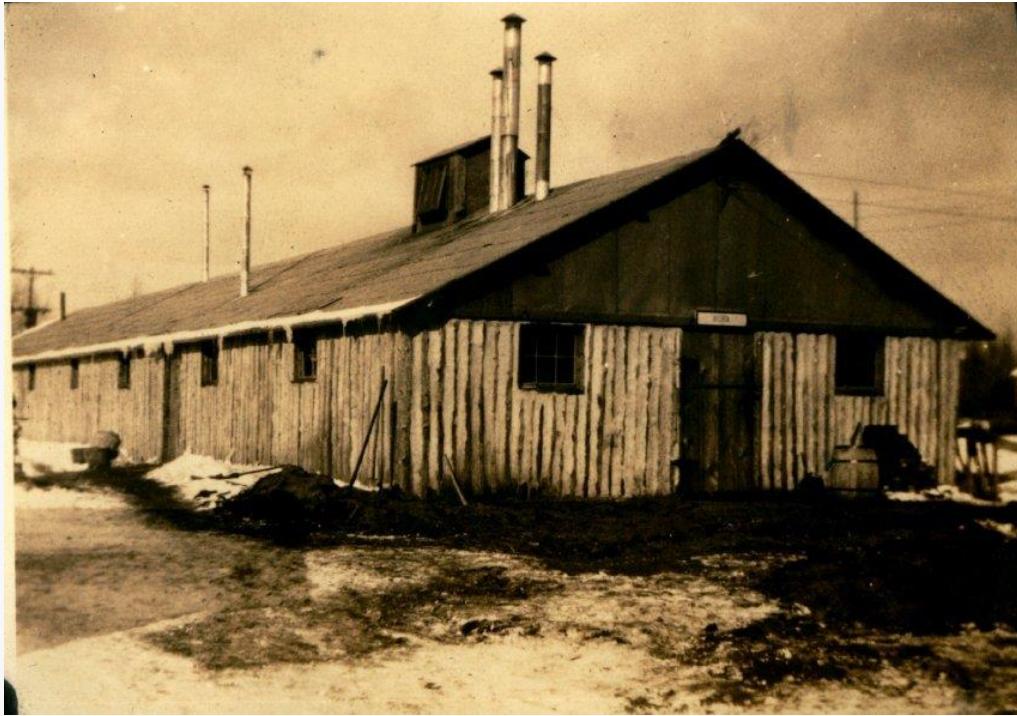
heading west reveals two cement blocks that may have been guide wire anchors for the camp radio tower, suggesting the general location of the building that housed the radio communications equipment in 1936.

Immediately to the right is the large Ranger Garage that has several raised concrete "ramps," presumably to lift vehicles for service. This building has an atypical foot print, suggesting as many as two additions were added to the original structure. Logically, when Camp Mercer became an administrative camp in 1935, the garage facility needed to be expanded to accommodate other camp needs.

A series of buildings also paralleled the Manitowish River that appeared to be smaller barracks for officers and the infirmary. One of the central buildings along the river had a fieldstone fireplace. Typically, CCC buildings used stoves to heat buildings, suggesting the possibility that the stone fireplace may signify a structure with a special purpose.

A unique feature of 660th Company is an architectural anomaly of a log cabin mess hall created during the earliest phases of 660th Company Construction. "...first building erected was the mess hall, made of logs and put together by such men as Dan McDonald, Dan Weir, and Mike Barney, three venerable lumberjacks from the Paul Bunyan days." [xl] Today, the log cabin berm parallels the old

camp road, revealing the site of the mess hall. Archaeologists Mark Bruhy and Katie Egan-Bruhy, who are experienced in documenting Minnesota and Wisconsin CCC camps, immediately



**Camp Mercer Log Mess Hall 1933**

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noted this anomaly, confirming that bermed structures were atypical for CCC camps. Reviewing the private photo collection of Ambrose McKloskey, an image of the Camp Mercer mess hall reveals atypical horizontal log construction, a clear departure from typical CCC mess halls and buildings. Plywood has been furnished to line the lower four feet of the walls in all kitchen and mess hall buildings and in four barrack buildings of each fixed camp in the district; the kitchen being lined with sheet metal behind kitchen ranges.”<sup>[xli]</sup> Likely, as an early CCC camp, 660th Company was able to stray from standard CCC building protocols. Importantly, reviewing images in Sparta CCC District, Sixth Corp Area Annual illustrates that other CCC companies occasionally built log structures as well.

Moving west, toward the central portion of Camp Mercer, reveals sanitary facilities along the Manitowish River where the barracks’ quadrangle joins. These sanitary facilities seemed to have evolved over time. Initially, bathing took place in the Manitowish River. Slightly further north of the river, cement tanks, slabs, and plumbing for the long-term camp shower house were stationed. The bathhouse

was another critical building located on the central part of camp and was constructed in the fall of 1933. Today, the cement foundation and concrete clearly define the foot print of the bathhouse. Aerial photos from the 1930s reveal numerous smaller buildings near the bathhouse, but little evidence remains of those structures. The original bathhouse caught fire and needed to be rebuilt on the same site.

Gravity-fed toilets were important upgrades to Company 660's infrastructure. "Installation of tip bucket latrine units at the following camps: Brule, Mineral Lake, Riley Creek, Sheep Ranch, Scott Lake, Smith Lake, Long Lake, Arbutus Lake, Elcho, Mercer..." [xlii] Based on remaining structure foundations, CCC standards for sewage treatment were closely followed at Company 660. "Sewage disposal system at each camp consisting of septic tanks, grease traps, filter beds and approximately 1,800 feet of tile." [xliii] The latrines seemed to be exclusively located away from the river, closer to old Highway 51.

In 1935, a second barracks was constructed to relieve overcrowding. This barracks, constructed as the Camp Mercer headquarters, north of the barracks' quad, was to accommodate the new demands the 660<sup>th</sup> Company evolving into the 5<sup>th</sup> Forestry Subdistrict Headquarters for 12 CCC camps.



**Camp Mercer c1935 With Newer Construction**  
CCC Museum, Rhinelander Wisconsin

Further reconnaissance of the 660th Company site heading north reveals a cement sewage tank near the officers' headquarters. Apparently, these facilities were added later as part of CCC construction protocols. "Furnishing and installing of water

closets in the Officers' Quarters and Forestry Quarters buildings of the 5th period construction camps—camps of previous construction having been so furnished." [xlivii] The CCC Company 660's Headquarters office was located north of the barracks' quad and near old Highway 51. Old sheet metal, deep burrows, and other building materials clearly identify the site of the CCC headquarters. New officers' space, conference rooms, and support staff accommodated the expanded needs of the 5th Forestry Subdistrict in 1935. Regional conferences, meetings and training were conducted on this portion of the camp.

The baseball diamond and track and field venue were located along the western edge of the barracks' quad. Marked on the 1934 camp map, the athletic area is well defined. Numerous track and field events and a 100-yard dash track ran just north of the road that headed west. Just south of the 100-yard dash track was the baseball diamond. Currently, much of the old ball field has small pines, tall grass and berry brambles covering its large area, but a rough outline of the ball diamond and outfield are still visible. One of the favorite camp activities was swimming, and the 1934 camp map clearly notes the "swimming hole," which was just south of the baseball outfield. Also, on the south western edge of the baseball field was the site of a camp garden that was begun in 1936. The garden became a point of camp pride and logically helped with the education department's agriculture classes while providing fresh vegetables.



**Camp Mercer Dynamite Shack or Magazine**  
Manitowish Waters Historical Society

Another unique feature of 660th Company was a cement dynamite shack that still stands. Heading west from the CCC 660th Company site along the road paralleling the Manitowish River to what appears to be the camp dump, also reveals a well-preserved cement structure left of the road. The dynamite shack is in great condition and illustrates a little-known practice of CCC construction and land clearing. Importantly, images from the Ambrose McKloskey collection and Mercer Monitor articles evidence the importance dynamite played in completing the construction and fire prevention missions of the 660<sup>th</sup> Company. The men from Camp Mercer engaged in serious work, traveling far and wide to support the missions of CCC and State Forests.

The CCC movement ultimately disappeared due to the requirements of WWII. Since CCC camps were operated by the U.S. Army, CCC officers and men were easily diverted to defend our nation. In 1939, Europe and Asia had engaged in WWII, and FDR was planning for potential large-scale mobilization. On September 16, 1940, the Selective Training and Service Act was passed creating a formal draft and required registration of men 21-45 years of age with the Selective Service. "The History of Iron County" published by the Works Progress Administration in 1937-38 reveals that 11 CCC camps in Wisconsin would be closed in October of 1937. Initially, Camp Mercer was targeted for closure, but outreach to Washington later clarified that Camp Upson was closing. Additionally, the State Park CCC at Copper Falls also closed in October of 1937.<sup>[xlvi]</sup> In 1941, testimony from the Wisconsin Senate indicated that State Forest CCC camps had to be reduced from a high of 25 camps to 12.<sup>[xlvi]</sup> Clearly, the 5<sup>th</sup> Subdivision of CCC camps from the Sparta District were being cycled out. The status of Camp Mercer post 1941 remains unclear.

Advocacy for the important work of the CCC in Wisconsin continued as the program faced termination. Mrs. Max J. Schmitt from the Wisconsin Garden Club Federation blistered congress in a letter:

"We know that the element of time is a big factor in forest production, and therefore protest discontinuing of our Civilian Conservation Corps. We know that the young men are needed in the fighting forces, but we are sure that young women of America are in no way inferior to the young women of our allied countries, and we are ready to prove that we can do our share in the forest protecting, and planting program. All we ask is a chance. This means of course, that our Congress must give us a chance by voting us funds enough to send young

women into camps to carry on the work our Civilian Conservation Corps boys started."[xlvii]

Clearly, the work of the CCC program was valued by many citizens. In the face of WWII, Mrs. Schmitt displayed the kind of patriotism and determination that drove American women to support our country



**LaPorte Logging Camp c1915**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/3074C607-AC59-42B7-A297-348699467005>

with their time and talents. Though a formal women's CCC program was impractical given the needs of our country at war, her spirit was evidenced by the millions of women who supported the war effort in their homes, in factories, and in military service like the WOW's (Women Ordnance Worker), WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service), WAAC's (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps), and WASP's (Women's Airforce Service Pilots).

Finally, an earlier river drive era logging camp is also present on the Camp Mercer campus. Michael Dunn, Manitowish Waters' historian, documented, "George LaPorte and his dad logged in 1910-1911 as contractors on 3 forties-- camp where CCC camp was in the 1930. They put the logs into the river, boomed them to Manitowish, loaded them on rail cars to go to Scott & Howe, Ironwood."[xlviii] Berms along the logging road west of the old baseball field corroborate the claims of Dunn and mark the site of the LaPorte camp. Members of the LaPorte family were ambitious itinerate loggers who had been in the area since the late 1880's. As river drive logging was coming to a close, the LaPorte's settled

near the Manitowish River. Dunn further reports that the next year, "George [LaPorte] in 1911-1912- logging -built camp 1 mile west of Manitowish in fall 1911.- one big building 50 feet long with root cellar at one end and a 16 foot addition at on end for sleeping quarters."[xii]This camp is clearly a multi-use site that enjoys well-documented cultural traditions.

## Conclusion



**Camp Mercer Telephone Pole Installation**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/EBEDE8AC-5656-411A-AD48-378270166220>

Today, most Americans cannot imagine the dramatic change the CCC brought to men who volunteered to leave home, support their families, and help improve our nation's environment. Traveling to new regions, benefiting from educational courses, developing key skills, and working hard helped the CCC men and a nation move forward in the face of global economic disaster.

"Enrollment in the CCC peaked in August 1935. At the time, more than 500,000 corpsmen were spread across 2,900 camps. It's estimated that nearly three million men – about five percent of the total

United States male population – took part in the CCC over the course of the agency's nine-year history."[lv]

The story of 660th Company at Camp Mercer continues to be important. The contributions of these men helped define our region by protecting and preserving Northwoods State Forest natural resources.

Journalist Tom Brokaw suggests efforts of U.S. citizens responding to the Great Depression and World War II earned them the legacy of "The Greatest Generation." These Americans stepped up, saving the United States from economic collapse and the world from totalitarian dictatorship. Camp Mercer's stories and images allow citizens today a peek into how many of the youth from the Greatest Generation contributed to the recovery of America. Their pride, determination and perseverance to achieve a common goal of environmental renewal evidence why the CCC remains one the most popular New Deal projects. Importantly, the rigorous training and achievements of CCC men also proved to be formative to the mobilization of U.S military forces in World War II.

The relatively intact site for CCC 660th Company and unique architectural features of the log mess hall and dynamite shack suggest the DNR may wish to develop a special management plan for this historic property and possibly allow the addition of an interpretive component. The mostly undisturbed site, level terrain, existing roads, and large number of photos documenting the camp could make this site an historic destination in close proximity to both highway 51 and the new Mercer bike trail.

**Restrictions on Visitors of Camp Mercer** Please respect both the law and best practices when visiting cultural sites on public lands in the state of Wisconsin. Be aware no one can disturb any cultural site or take artifacts without a permit from the State Archaeologist as covered under Wisconsin law in State Statute:

**"44.47 Field archaeology.** This state reserves to itself the exclusive right and privilege of field archaeology on state sites, and establishes regulations for field archaeology on sites owned by political subdivisions, in order to protect and preserve archaeological and scientific information, matter and objects. It is a declaration of legislative intent that persons practicing field archaeology on privately owned land are encouraged to pursue their field archaeology in accordance with this section, and that the looting of all archaeological remains be strongly discouraged. Persons having knowledge of the location of archaeological sites are encouraged to communicate such information to the state archaeologist. This section is not intended to burden persons who wish to use state public property for recreational and other lawful purposes or to unnecessarily restrict the use of state public property."

Importantly the State Statute defines key terms regarding archaeological sites and cultural resources on ALL public lands. Specifically, these sections are important:

**(2) Unlicensed field archaeology prohibited.** No person other than the state archaeologist and individuals licensed by the director may engage in any field archaeology on any state site or site owned by a political subdivision.

**(6) Cooperation of state agencies and political subdivisions.** All state agencies and political subdivisions whose activities may be affected under this section shall cooperate with the historical society and the state archaeologist to carry out this section.

Also, some folks in the Northwoods are confused regarding the metal detecting laws on public lands. Metal detecting on public land requires a permit ONLY to look for lost personal property. Any metal detecting for artifacts is strictly illegal on public lands, including lakes, rivers and streams. Metal detecting permits are NOT issued in the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest where Camp Mercer is located.

Most importantly, those visiting archaeological and cultural sites should follow best practices as suggested from the Washington State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation:

Archaeological sites are fragile and nonrenewable. Proper etiquette is essential when visiting ancient sites. Appreciate the site and contemplate times long past, but please leave the site undisturbed for others to enjoy. Once damaged, the secrets an archaeological site can tell us are lost forever.

- Stay back from any exposed edges, soils, or rock features. Do not step on artifacts.
- Stay on established trails and avoid creating new ones
- Please do NOT remove or disturb anything. Strict laws prohibit the removal and theft of artifacts. If you do accidentally move something, put it back exactly where you found it.
- avoid handling artifacts and the vegetation

**Respecting the remaining cultural resources at Camp Mercer is the best way to say, thank you and farewell to the CCC boys along the Mantiowish River.**



**CCC Camp Mercer Swimming Hole 1933-34**

Manitowish Waters Historical Society

<https://mwhistory.pastperfectonline.com/photo/D07CFAFF-EE1A-4780-ADEC-591771065747>

#### Notes

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[ii] [http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC\\_Brief\\_History.html](http://www.ccclegacy.org/CCC_Brief_History.html). Civilian Conservation Corps Legacy. Retrieved 11-16-2018.

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[xi] Ibid.,

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] Ibid., p. 87.

[xiv] Ibid., p. 187.

[xv] Ibid., p. 166.

[xvi] *Mercer Monitor* (1935). Camp Mercer Becomes headquarters of the 5th Forestry Sub-Division District. [online] p.2. Available at: [http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2019\\_2\\_20.pdf](http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2019_2_20.pdf) [Accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

[xvii] *Mercer Monitor* (1935). Camp Mercer Becomes headquarters of the 5th Forestry Sub-Division District. [online] p.2. Available at: [http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2019\\_2\\_20.pdf](http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2019_2_20.pdf) [Accessed 2 Nov. 2019].

[xviii] Ibid., P. 189

[xix] Ibid.

[xx] *Mercer Monitor* (1934). Camp Mercer Broadcasts; 7:00—7:15 Every Wednesday Eve. [online] p.1. Available at: [http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2019\\_2\\_9.pdf](http://ppolinks.com/mwhistory/2019_2_9.pdf) [Accessed 9 Nov. 2019].

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[xxii] <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/28084>. Sixth Corp Area Annual. Retrieve 11-16-18. p. 87.

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[xxv] Hittle, Michael. An Accidental Jewel: Wisconsin's Turtle-Flambeau Flowage. Mineral Point, WI: Little Creek Press and Book Design, 2018.

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[xxx] Ibid.

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[xxxviii] <https://www.fbi.gov/video-repository/newss-lessons-at-little-bohemia/view>. Lessons at Little Bohemia. Retrieved 10-13-2019.

[xxxix] Ibid.

[xl] <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/28084>. Sixth Corp Area Annual. Retrieve 11-16-18, p. 86.

[xli] Ibid., p. 188.

[xlii] Ibid., p. 188.

[xliii] Ibid., p. 189.

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[xlv] <http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/wch/id/58348>. History of Iron County. Wisconsin Historical Society. 1937-38. Retrieved 10, Nov. 2019.

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