

The Second Round

On a Friday night in the spring of 1934, I found myself in the boxing ring in a three-round match at Camp F-5 of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The camp was located 14 miles from the “metropolis” of New Augusta, Mississippi, which was 35 miles from Hattiesburg. It was a friendly sparring match with an Italian kid. All of us were from the New York City area and almost all were Irish, Italian or Jewish. Friday night fights were a weekly event open to volunteers, rewarded by a pack of “tailor-made” cigarettes. We even had “managers,” who also were our corner men. My manager was a world war one veteran.

We danced around each other, throwing light punches and trying to put on a good bout without hurting each other. In the second round, I threw what is known as a right cross to his chin without any extra force. The blow was like a smooth golf stroke that connects so perfectly with the ball that it travels long and straight without great force having been exerted. It staggered my “opponent,” and I “carried” him for the rest of the round by clinching with him for a while until he recovered.

What was the CCC? On March 4, 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated in the midst of the Great Depression. He and his “brain trust” created a number of “alphabet agencies,” such as PWA, CWA, AAA, FHA, SEC. One of these was the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corps, open to fit young men aged eighteen to twenty-six, as well as veterans of World War One and the Spanish-American War.

The U.S. Army was selected to manage the CCC. In September 1933 I joined the CCC at Army HQ at Whitehall Street, in lower Manhattan. From there our group went to

Camp Dix in New Jersey. Our company leader there was a Captain Kelly, whose mission was to outfit and orient us to the ways of the army. I was now drinking coffee everyday with my meals. The word got around that it was spiked with saltpeter to suppress male ardor. This was not true, but we all believed it.

The CCC was a civilian relief program, consistent with the concept of work for pay. For \$30 a month plus Army food and board in a newly constructed camp, we built creosote bridges over creeks, staked out new roads, cut trees, dynamited the stumps and created gravel roads. We also made fire-free lanes by denuding the vegetation so the forest fires could not cross. When there were fires, we went out with water containers on our backs and wet them down. I also realized a kid's dream of operating a road grader, pulled behind a tractor, to shape the level of the road.

Of the \$30 per month, I received only \$5. The remainder was sent to my parents. There were six family members still at home. Besides my parents, I had two brothers and two sisters. I had to leave City College of New York (CCNY) after my first year as an evening student, even though it was tuition-free, because I could not find any work. My family needed the money and the CCC seemed like a good solution. There were other compensations as well: I gained 18 pounds of muscle in my ten and a half months there. I learned a lot about the ins and outs of the army, so that when I was willingly drafted in 1942 I had an advantage adjusting to military life.

In "the C's," we ate out of army mess kits. I remember early on complaining to Mess Sergeant Diener of the regular army that the gravy and the applesauce were mixing together in the mess kit. He told me not to worry about it; "it all goes down the same pipe".

After a few days at Camp Dix we embarked on a southbound train. There was a rest stop at Knoxville, Tennessee. We all got off to walk about, and we encountered a large group of high school girls who eagerly engaged us in conversation. This was the first time I had ever heard a southern accent. There was a musical lilt to their way of talking which enchanted all of us New Yorkers. For their part, the young ladies seemed glad to chat with a group of young men from up North with a “New Yawk” accent. It was a happy interlude for all. Also, as I later learned, not all southern accents were the same, and none more musical than in Knoxville.

We then proceeded to the naval air station at Pensacola, Florida, where we awaited our final assignment to Company 232 at Camp F-5 in New Augusta, Mississippi.

: For those too young to remember, I must explain that in those days of the Great Depression, things were different for those of us who smoked. “Tailor Made” cigarettes were a costly luxury. We “rolled our own” from a sack of Bull Durham, which was much cheaper. Those were the “good old days.” If we stay on course, we may get there again.

This was the first memoir I ever wrote, for the HILR class in February, 2005.