

Camp Life: The Queer History of “Manhood” in the Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933–1937

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For Ira Freeman, district chaplain for western Pennsylvania, the creation of a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933 represented far more than a new deal; it represented the dawn of a new era in the history of American manhood. In his mind, and the minds of many others like him, it was the American spirit that had withered and cracked and blown away on arid winds during the years leading up to the Great Depression. And it was this Civilian Conservation Corps—this corps for the conservation of civilians—that would seed and water the fertile soil of youth, and once again bring forth from the reluctant earth a generation of Americans with the brute strength and manly resolve to remake the nation from nothing. “I humbly prophesy that the conservation of these three hundred thousand lads will save future historians from the painful task of admitting that the American knighthood that flowered in 1776 withered until it became lounging sissyhood in 1933,” he asserted in that same year.¹ As we shall see, however, Freeman was at least partially mistaken.

Between 1933 and 1942 hundreds of thousands of young men left the modest homes in which they had been raised and joined the Civilian Conservation Corps. Almost from its inception, the young men who enrolled in President Roosevelt’s Emergency Relief Work program used their time in the homosocial world of the CCC to negotiate the meanings of masculinity and American manhood. While many enrollees did avail themselves of the opportunities that the CCC provided to acquire the discipline, job training, and self-confidence

that Freeman believed would set them firmly on the path toward middle-class masculinity, others experimented freely with the conventions of gender by donning women's clothing to perform for their fellow enrollees around the evening campfire, or in the outlandish drag shows that constituted a popular genre of camp theatrical. Men who felt less comfortable impersonating women turned to group sport, bodybuilding, and the physical culture movement in an effort to invest their bodies with the appearance of power and an aura of manliness and health. But even these ostensibly "manly" pastimes became part of the surprisingly homoerotic discourse of gendered and sexualized artifice through which CCC enrollees nationwide amused themselves during months spent in isolated rural encampments. Certain aspects of this discourse bore the unmistakable mark of garden-variety misogyny and narcissistic machismo. But in other ways it listed dramatically—indeed, often *melodramatically*—in the direction of a campy knowingness about the queer implications of homosociality that was an important part of many male same-sex milieus during the twentieth century (two obvious examples would be the YMCA and the U.S. military during WWII), but which has only recently come to be recognized as a significant point of intersection between the very particular social history of gay male life in the United States and the history of masculinity and sexuality more generally.² Indeed, in the liminal space of the CCC camp, there can be little doubt that a generation of young men played fast and loose with the conventional meaning of "normal" manhood.

The Civilian Conservation Corps was officially created by Executive Order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on April 5, 1933. Less than two weeks later, enrollees were *en route* to the site of the first camp in Luray, Virginia. More than 250,000 American men entered the Corps during the first six months, the vast majority within sixty days of Roosevelt having signed the organization into existence. On June 1, 1933, daily enrollment peaked when selection agents working throughout the country managed to forward 13,843 men to reconditioning camps in a single day.³ In both human and geographic terms, the scale of the operation was staggering. Indeed, with the exception of the twentieth century's two world wars, no national operation has brought more American men under the immediate sway of federal authority more swiftly than the CCC.⁴

The efficiency with which new enrollees, or "peavies,"⁵ were processed and deployed can be attributed in part to the fact that oversight of the enrollment process fell to the War Department, an agency with considerable experience recruiting and evaluating young men for entry into national service. Officially, the CCC sought to recruit young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three, particularly those men whom local enrollment agents deemed especially ill-equipped to find work in the virtually non-existent job market of Depression-era America. Yet while the CCC was clearly intended to function as a major component in Roosevelt's overall plan for national economic recovery,

proponents of the Corps insisted that it serve as much more than just another direct relief program.

During the swift but grueling selection process, local selections agents repeatedly reminded would-be enrollees that the CCC would offer them a "scholarship in work experience" and a unique opportunity for personal growth, not a handout.⁶ War Department representatives encouraged selection agents to use their own discretion and common sense in assessing the worthiness of applicants, as well as their overall suitability for life in a CCC camp. But top-level administrators in Washington explicitly encouraged them to seek out young men who were "mature," "dependable," "mentally alert," and sincerely interested in the Corps as a "work and training opportunity."⁷

During the Corps' first year, these selection criteria yielded a cohort of enrollees that was, generally speaking, young, relatively uneducated, slightly malnourished, and predominantly rural in origin. In fact, according to an informal survey taken by members of Company 1713 in Cassville, Missouri, "Mr. Average Rookie" in April of 1934 was "a farmer by occupation, aged 20 years and 8 months. He is five feet, eight inches tall and weighs 141 pounds. He has had slightly over eight grades of schooling, and he left school about five years ago."⁸ Clearly, Corps organizers had their work cut out for them if they intended to transform rough specimens such as these into the future of American manhood.

During its first year, the CCC established camps in remote locations across the United States. Camps developed their own cultures and traditions, and in many cases enrollees came to think of them as second homes. Yet as distant from one another in space as they may have been, camps were connected by a complicated network of information exchange. *Happy Days*, the weekly newspaper of the CCC, was perhaps the most important and most revealing instrument in this network. In its pages, a skeletal editorial staff located in Washington, DC, cobbled together second-hand stories and first-hand accounts of everyday life in camps throughout the country. Many of these stories and accounts originally appeared in individual camp newspapers. By collecting them, the editors of *Happy Days* managed to preserve compelling evidence of a side of the Civilian Conservation Corps that has, surprisingly, gone largely unnoticed by contemporary historians of gender and sexuality.

In its day, the enormous significance of *Happy Days* was widely acknowledged. On May 11, 1934, President Roosevelt addressed an open letter of congratulations to the editors and readers of the weekly: "I congratulate the editors of 'Happy Days' and the men of the C.C.C. for having such a satisfactory and useful newspaper," Roosevelt effused. "I am informed that the circulation of 'Happy Days' throughout the more than fourteen hundred camps has contributed strongly toward the maintenance of a high state of morale, not only among the three hundred thousand enrollees, but among the administrative and supervisory personnel." Roosevelt continued his endorsement of the publication's monumental accomplishment, asserting that *Happy Days* had also "aided in

making the men of the C.C.C. conscious that they are doing good, useful work and proud of the fact that they are doing it. It has assisted also, in making the young men feel they are a part of a National Movement for the conservation of men. . . .”⁹

Anyone who examines the pages of *Happy Days* has to wonder whether Roosevelt actually bothered to read it before he jotted his congratulatory note. Perhaps his knowledge of the publication was strictly second hand. Or perhaps, as his language seems to suggest, Roosevelt had only been “informed” of the newspaper’s uplifting effects by members of his staff. Whatever the case may have been, during its first years of publication, *Happy Days* was saturated with news reports, stories, and images depicting enrollees as a fun-loving bunch of men whose high morale could be traced more directly to drag shows, campy slang, and an obsessive worship of the muscled male physique than to anything contemporary readers would associate immediately with heterosexual “manhood,” strictly speaking.

From the time they arrived at camp, enrollees were made to believe that they were engaged in an endeavor of monumental historical importance. Not only were they charged with the responsibility of preserving the magisterial grandeur of America’s fields, forests, and streams; they were charged with preserving the manly confidence of future generations of American men. This was an auspicious task to say the least, especially for a group of young men who weeks before their enrollment were unable to maintain their own health and economic sustenance, let alone the legacy of American manhood.

Thus, with the weightiness of their task in mind, enrollees naturally went stumbling over one another to pretty themselves up for posterity’s sake when a CCC photographer showed up in Floral, Alabama, to photograph the members of Company 1483 for a book titled *The History of the Camps*. “It was a grand rush for the bathhouse, mirrors, yelling for combs, brushes, powder and hair tonic,” reported Lewis B. Watson, a company member and writer for *Happy Days*.¹⁰ “‘Country’ Walters won the company prize, having borrowed a complete outfit of clothes. He swiped eyebrow pencil, lipstick and beauty cream. The result,” Watson assured his readers, “was a masterpiece.”¹¹ Clearly, if one was going to enter the history books as the image of American manhood’s last great hope, it was crucially important to look absolutely *fabulous* when doing so.

Enrollees hardly needed the excuse of a company photo shoot to focus attention on their appearance or the appearance of their fellow corpsmen. On the contrary, attractiveness, bodily perfection, and the appearance of physical health took on air of everyday importance in the context of an organization that placed such a heavy emphasis on repairing the malnourished male bodies that it received from all corners of the depression-ravaged country. Some CCC enrollees found a place for themselves within this discourse of manly health through their own disciplined physical exercise. For others, however, the CCC’s decidedly physical culture provided a wonderful excuse to traffic in the campy, potentially risqué language in a more vicarious manner—through participation in the Corps’

tongue-in-cheek culture of same-sex body worship. "For many months now," *Happy Days* writers announced in June 1934, "the editors of this paper have been receiving claims from the camps—first from this one, then from that one—all insisting that in 'their' particular camp resides the best-looking man in the whole C.C.C."¹² Though they conceded that some early reports received during the winter of 1933 and the spring of 1934 had been accompanied by photographs that "seemed to back up the claims," the editors nonetheless resolved to stay out of the matter. By summer, however, the call for a Corps-wide consensus on the comeliest enrollee was undeniable. Editors reported that they had "come to a decision . . . that there might be something to this best looking man idea. . . . [I]f you have an Adonis in YOUR camp whom you think runs a chance of being the most handsome man in the whole C.C.C., send in his picture. . . . Now, come on, you handsome guys, we're ready for you."¹³

During the first year of the Corps' existence, *Happy Days* reported several all-male beauty contests in CCC camps. In Buffalo, Wyoming, for example, members of Company 833 had arranged a men-only "Bathing Beauty Contest" in which members of the camp competed against one another for the adoration of their peers. "The comeliest example of masculine pulchritude will be awarded a handsome pair of suspenders," the newspaper noted, "and the decision of the judges is supposed to be final."¹⁴ In Sloatsburg, New York, "blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked" Herbert J. Kaselow won a similarly impromptu competition arranged by members of Company 201. Apparently Kaselow was known to have caught the attention of many of the voluptuous young girls from surrounding villages as he "promenades down the country lanes." Their adoration for the handsome young man was misplaced, however, since Herb claimed to prefer "the blond, flapper type of girl." Even if appealing objects for his affections were in short supply in the forested recesses of upstate New York, Kaselow was anything if unoccupied: ". . . as is usual with all beauty contest winners, Herb is busy auto-graphing shaving cream, tooth paste, etc."¹⁵

All-male beauty contests were relatively common occurrences in camps across the United States, but they were certainly not the only campy affairs of the young men of the CCC. When enrollees gathered after a day's work they often camped it up while they chatted, drank tea, darned socks, or played cards. Members of Company 1439 of Vilas, Florida, dubbed their education tent "The Old Ladies' Pink Tea Party" after the camp's assistant education advisor took it upon himself to tutor some enrollees in the art of contract bridge.¹⁶ In Napoleon, Ohio, members of Company 553 were even more outrageous. They organized themselves by barracks into three groups: the "Sissies," the "Pansies," and the "Farmers."¹⁷ And in Rickers Mills, Vermont, barrack mates in Company 1217 organized informal "clubs" and gave them names such as "the State Street Social," "The House of Horrors," "The Bugs Hut," and "The City Slickers." According to *Happy Days*, "When things get too quiet, or when they get too tired of listening to the radio, writing letters or reading, they make tea, gossip about the officers, and sew."¹⁸

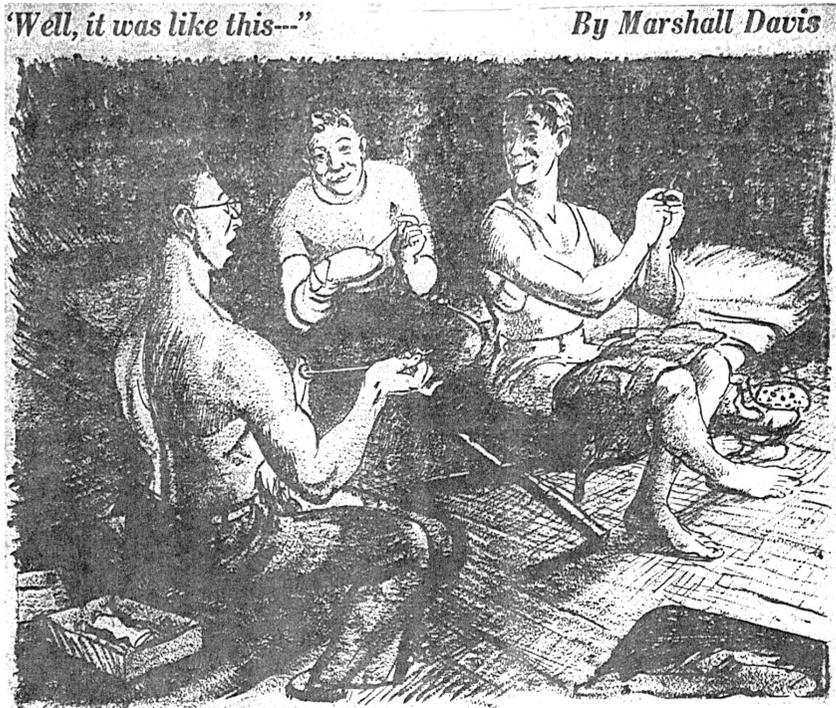


Figure 1. “Well, it was like this---,” a typical example of the campy work by CCC cartoonist Marshall Davis. *Happy Days*, March 30, 1935. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Enrollees manifested their camp sensibilities in visual terms as well. In a prominently placed cartoon by Marshall Davis, three enrollees sit half-dressed in their bunkhouse, darning socks and gossiping.¹⁹ (See Figure 1.) Lest the campy irony of Davis’s imagined, but evidently not *uncommon*, scene go unnoticed, the men are marked as both quintessentially masculine and unmistakably fey. Davis meticulously sketched bulging muscles on the broad back and narrow waist of the figure in the foreground marking him as masculine and physically imposing. At the extreme end of the figure’s admirably developed arm, however, is a hand that seems as though it belongs to some other body. With pinky finger daintily extended, the hand does what might be considered “women’s work,” pulling yarn through an open hole in the toe of a sock. In the cartoon, two other enrollees look on, engrossed, with knowing, cherubic smiles, delicately arched eyebrows, heavily muscled arms and torsos, and threaded, busy needles. One of the men has his legs crossed in a “lady-like” fashion.

As Davis’s cartoon suggests, enrollees understood the irony of their situation. In some ways, life in a CCC camp did provide a unique opportunity for them to

prepare themselves to be physically fit, skilled, and disciplined breadwinners—all important aspects of the American manhood that the Corps was intended to “conserve.” But in other ways, living among men made it very difficult for enrollees to prepare themselves to take their supposedly “rightful” place at the head of a household upon leaving the Corps, particularly in an America where men and women’s gender roles were becoming more and more separate and defined with each passing day. This point was made painfully clear to enrollees at Camp Skokie Valley in Glenview, Illinois. In the spring of 1935 members of the Spanish-American War Veterans Auxiliary visited the camp. The women were given a full tour and entertained over lunch by enrollees who talked proudly about their experiences in the camp. Reportedly, the visiting women “were astonished at the cleanliness of the kitchens and mess halls; the coziness of the company recreation rooms, the comfortable looking barracks with their clean white sheets and pillow cases and woolen blankets and comforters.”²⁰ So impressed were they, in fact, that one of the visiting women was prompted to observe “what fine *wives* these boys would make; it is too bad that our modern girls cannot be taught such good housekeeping as these CCC boys are being taught in Skokie.”²¹ Apparently, enrollees were not the only people who felt the peculiar circumstances of their lives deserved a campy quip or two.

As Philip Core has noted, “[c]amp is in the eyes of the beholder, especially if the beholder is camp.”²² “Camp” as a quality may be defined as a predisposition toward finding strength and humor in weakness and tragedy. Thus, to the degree that having to darn one’s own socks constituted feminization in an era when such work was typically done by women, and to the extent that feminization was synonymous with precisely the kind of weakening of American manhood that the CCC was intended to reverse, enrollees’ decision to self-consciously embrace, publicize, and even celebrate the queerness of their homosocial circumstances demonstrates a kind of camp or proto-camp sensibility. This kind of sensibility has traditionally been associated with the gay male, and, to some extent, lesbian subcultures that flourished in American cities throughout the twentieth century.²³ One needn’t strain one’s critical insight very much to see that camp life was a “camp” life for at least some of the young, predominantly rural men who enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps during the darkest days of the Great Depression. Anything and everything was subject to knowing innuendo in CCC camps, including camp mascots: the members of not one, but *two* California companies boasted in the pages of *Happy Days* that they had adopted cats as their camp mascots and named them “Oscar Wilde.”²⁴

Officially, the CCC promised to make “men” of enrollees by training their minds, bodies, and spirits under the most challenging conditions. Indeed, the CCC initially garnered the overwhelming support that it did because it promised to preserve, protect, and even improve two of the wounded nation’s most valuable natural resources: American soil and American manhood. Unofficially, however, enrollees understood that strict adherence to a traditional male gender role was impossible under camp circumstances. Some enrollees grudgingly put

up with having to do the essential domestic work that their mothers had most likely done at home because somebody had to do it; or, more likely, because they were ordered to do it by the commanding officer of the camp. But rather than compound the sense of humiliation some probably already felt as a result, they chose instead to laugh about it, making jokes about their own feminization.

One of those “jokes” was male-to-female cross-dressing. Almost from the beginning, some CCC enrollees donned women’s attire to amuse, entertain, and subtly deceive their fellow corporsmen. Sometimes these displays of female impersonation were garish, unconvincing, and patently misogynistic. In other instances, enrollees reported being thoroughly convinced by their fellow corporsmen’s drag performances. Regardless of whether young rural men slipped into stockings, dresses, and makeup to get in touch with their “feminine side” or to ridicule it, one fact remains certain: cross-dressing and “drag” of various sorts was anything but uncommon in hundreds of CCC camps throughout the United States.

Womanless weddings, for example, were occasional occurrences in CCC settlements. In Provo, Utah, members of the “overhead gang,” triumphed in Company 958’s “all camp night” competition by treating their fellow enrollees to a presentation of “The Shotgun Wedding,” a typical example of this more or less rural genre of folk performance. (See Figure 2.) According to one account, “Beautifully gowned Bath House Attendant Moore was the blushing bride . . . and was escorted by two six-foot tall brothers. Nightwatchman Hill was the ‘Pa,’ and he was accompanied by his trusty shotgun. Storekeeper Adams and Adviser Pack spoke the sweet words of love and First Aid Man Jense was the parson. Truck Driver Jensen, smaking his first cigar and suffocated in Capt. Sessions’ ‘tux,’ sweated thru the role of best man. The next day Jim was back doing household duties in the bath house.”²⁵

In Troy, Texas, one member of Company 1824, the “bride,” donned “a few bed sheets, table cloths and other assorted knic-knacks” to stage a womanless wedding that turned out to be “a howling success.”²⁶ Whether the event was staged to heal the social wound caused by a feud, as was commonly the instigating cause when womanless weddings were performed in the rural South, or whether it was merely an occasion for corporsmen to camp it up for the general amusement of their friends, is uncertain. What is certain, though, is that the impulse toward cross-dressing and female impersonation was not strictly indigenous to the homosocial environment of the camp. Some of the young men who joined the corps brought such traditions with them, and those traditions flourished in the world of the CCC camp.²⁷ Ultimately, however, CCC enrollees did not require any particularly compelling reason to throw on a dress, rouge their cheeks, and parade around the . . . well . . . campgrounds.

Some of the female impersonators in CCC camps were intentionally garish and unconvincing. An accomplished wrestler, swimmer, and baseball player, Peter “Roughhouse” Symanski (Figure 3) looked considerably more like a sail-

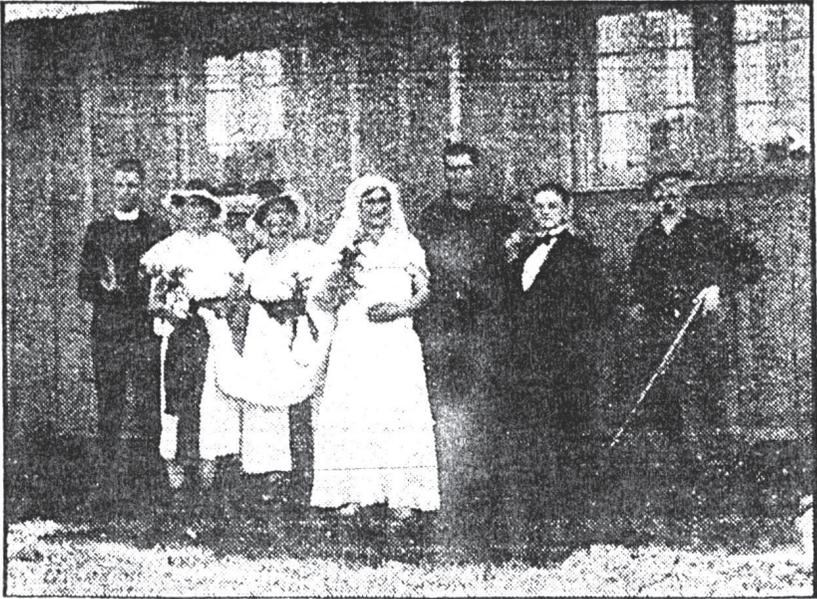


Figure 2. Members of Provo, Utah’s Company 985 pose for a photograph after a successful performance of “The Shotgun Wedding,” a “womanless wedding” similar to those performed in the U.S. South throughout the twentieth century. *Happy Days*, August 10, 1935. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

or than Mae West, the woman he intended to impersonate when he put on falsies and a knee-length house dress to perform in the follies of Company 1699, a reforestation outfit located near Richland Center, Wisconsin.²⁸ Even the warm embrace and wandering hands of a strapping fellow enrollee did nothing to improve the credibility of his campy rendition of West. Symanski’s invocation of West’s persona is suggestive, however. According to film historian Vito Russo, West was “one of the few performers of her time to acknowledge the existence of homosexuals.”²⁹ For example, in 1926 West had received considerable attention for having been arrested by New York police when her well-known play, *The Drag*, was closed down amidst charges of indecency. In 1933, just one year before Peter Symanski impersonated her in a CCC camp in remote Wisconsin, West once again gave a nonchalant nod in the direction of the homosexual subculture that she was known to publicly defend in her film, *She Done Him Wrong*.³⁰ Whether Symanski was pandering to West’s popularity as a camp icon, or her equal popularity as a voluptuous sex symbol in the minds of so-called “normal” men, his drag rendition paid homage, perhaps unwittingly, to both aspects of her scandalous public persona.

“Roughhouse” Symanski’s drag performance was less than convincing as female impersonation goes. But other enrollees appear to have done much

better, sometimes passing with astonishing success. In Charleston, Rhode Island, for example, “[g]asps of amazement” were followed by hasty necktie adjustment and hair combing when “Josie” Gomes appeared on stage to open a vaudeville show sponsored by members of CCC Company 141. “‘She’ sang ‘Old Man River’ and had many hearts fluttering with unfeigned admiration until ‘she’ disclosed ‘herself’ as Joe Gomes—he-man forest recruit, and a swell female impersonator,” the pages of *Happy Days* reported. “It was the high spot of the evening’s entertainment.”³¹ Similarly, when fresh recruits arrived in Arkansas to settle in for a six-month stint as members of Company 1740 in May of 1934, they were met by the beguiling “Miss Nurse,” otherwise known as Mr. Hart. According to one report, “It wasn’t until [the] next day that some of them knew that she was none other than the outfit’s supply sergeant.”³²

Camp theatricals and special events such as the influx of a new cohort of “rookies” presented regular occasions for drag performance.

For some enrollees, however, drag and camp performance was an important aspect of everyday life in the CCC. For example, enrollee Curtis Culpepper was better known as “Miss Agnes” by his fellow enrollees in Company 1413, among whom “she” was reportedly wildly popular. (See Figure 4.) “Miss Culpepper is a favorite of all the boys of the camp. She attends all fires, often using a fire-flap to assist her in the work of dispelling flames in the woodlands. Her admirers often tease her by calling her the Fire Flapper.”³³

Culpepper’s camp shenanigans weren’t limited to evening fires, however. Instead, he appears to have spent most, if not all, of his time dressed in a manner that was intended to be ambiguous, at least. Furthermore, his peers and commanding officers seem to have appreciated this behavior. “This little girl takes her meals



Figure 3. Peter “Roughhouse” Symanski, a.k.a. “Mae West,” in the arms of a fellow enrollee outside of Richland Center, Wisconsin, during the summer of 1934. *Happy Days*, June 16, 1934. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

three times a day in camp, laughingly washing her messkit while rubbing elbows with her 'buddies,' as she affectionately calls the camp personnel."³⁴ Culpepper was evidently so convincing when dressed as a woman that his fellow enrollees decided to sponsor his entry into a beauty contest being held in nearby hamlet of Homerville, Georgia. Reportedly, Culpepper was a smashing success. "Her wistful smiles and sylphlike charms immediately met with plaudits of admirers when she appeared with other contestants on the eventful occasion."³⁵ Ultimately, "Agnes Culpepper" failed to claim the crown, but that doesn't appear to have diminished her appeal to her fellow enrollees. "Even though she failed to win the title of Miss Clinch County," *Happy Days* reported, ". . . Miss Culpepper will retain her unofficial rank as Queen of Clinch Camp P-52."³⁶

In the CCC, enrollees were able to take a break from many of the restrictive social conventions that usually governed everyday life in Depression-era America. They were also able to regain some of the youthful innocence and leisure that the nation's economic turmoil had taken from them. In camp, enrollees were able to play in ways they had never had time to while working on their family farms. As I have already shown, theatricals were an important form of recreation in camps. So were sports. Solitary and group athleticism flourished in CCC camps. Both within camps and between them, enrollees competed against one another on the gridiron, baseball diamond, track, and field. Boxing quickly became one of the most popular forms of sporting competition between enrollees. "With a zest and a zip that only red-blooded, healthy, carefree chaps can have," the enrollees of Company 1620 in Gwinn, Michigan, relished the "stinging smack of glove-leather against flesh" when they sparred with one another in the ring. "No pansies, no cream-puffs, no weaklings here," enrollee Ray Cotter reported. "We can see they're not sissies at least, for they've shown themselves

CHARMER



Figure 4. "Miss Agnes," as enrollee Curtis Culpepper was known, was the "Fire Flapper of Company 1413." *Happy Days*, April 28, 1934. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

able to ‘take it,’ and for that reason have made themselves worthy of Camp Escanaba.”³⁷

On the surface, organized athleticism was a self-evidently masculine affair. Group sporting events offered corpsmen the chance to learn important lessons about good sportsmanship and healthy competition at the same time that they cultivated a sense of fraternal solidarity and hardened their muscles. Yet even the culture of athleticism in the CCC seems to have offered occasion for suggestive, sexually charged, innuendo among enrollees. One obvious example of the extent to which camp sensibility lurked at the margins of even the manliest of CCC social rituals can be found in the margins that enclosed public reports about athletics in the camps. “Thru the Knothole,” a weekly sports column, appeared routinely in the pages of *Happy Days*. Ostensibly, athletic achievement and healthy competitiveness of enrollees was the subject of the feature; it usually consisted of little more than scattered reports about the outcomes of particularly exciting or significant games between rival camps. But its column header told a slightly different story. (See Figure 5.) Citing the visual imaginary of folklorish, small-town American life, the graphic consisted of a cartoonish line-sketch depicting a young enrollee balancing himself by grabbing hold of his knees as he bends over slightly to peer through a hole in what appears to be a wooden fence, beyond which a sporting event of some interest seems to be underway. The line sketch itself alludes to a familiar bit of Depression-era Americana—the image of a curious boy stealing glances of a sporting event through a hole in the side of the fence that surrounds the playing field, rather than paying the cost of admission to the game. In this case, however, there is something pornographic about it. Most strikingly, the putative innocence of the image is undermined by the perhaps merely unfortunate, but probably quite intentional fact that the middle crossbar on the final *E* in the word “KNOTHOLE” is printed in such a way that it crosses the sketched figure’s rump, thus appearing to penetrate him anally.³⁸ Indeed, the face of the figure seems to manifest gaped-mouthed surprise, possibly in response to what is transpiring on the other side of the wooden structure that blocks his view, but also, perhaps, at the presence of the large black rod that appears to be inserted in his rectum. Moreover, on second glance, one realizes that given the way the image is drawn, the wooden obstruction through which the figure peers could just as easily be the side of a bunkhouse or shower room as a fence surrounding an athletic playing field.

Different viewers in the present will see different things, of course. No doubt the same can be said for the image’s contemporary viewers as well. And while I hesitate to insist that the image’s creators necessarily intended to freight it with sexually charged double meaning, I do insist that this particular image is more than sufficiently suggestive to allow for reasonable speculation that enrollees themselves sensed something of the queer eroticism inherent in their homosocial world. Clearly, organized athletics effectively furthered several of the Corps’ explicit goals insofar as they provided enrollees with recreation, hardened their bodies, and forced them to work together as members of a team.

THRU THE KNOTHOLE

Opening Tilts Show Many Camps Getting In
Mid-Season Stride; New Talent Is
Uncovered: Hopes Are High

Cos. 1609 and 614, both of Starved Rock State Park, Utica, Ill., went into action like old veterans of the diamond, and opened the door on



Figure 5. This suggestive column head appeared regularly in the pages of *Happy Days*. Note especially how the middle crossbar of the final *E* on “KNOTHOLE” appears to be penetrating the figure’s backside. *Happy Days*, April 28, 1934. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

But competitive sporting also focused an inordinate amount of attention on the maturing bodies of young men, serving as a context in which others could begin to assess and admire the physiques and athletic skill of their fellow enrollees. While it is difficult to determine from this image alone the extent to which this aspect of male homosociality gave way to a culture of male homosexuality among enrollees in the CCC, the image that appeared on the sports page of *Happy Days* opens the possibility, at least, that athleticism and eroticism were entwined in the minds of at least some corpsmen.

Innuendo is a notoriously fussy brand of evidence, and it seldom offers any sense of historical certainty. But it is an undeniably significant aspect of everyday life, and it cannot be overlooked or deemed categorically inadmissible, particularly where the study of sexuality is concerned. In the end, so to speak, the question of whether the editors of *Happy Days* were simply slipping titillating and crude innuendo into their publication for the amusement of readers or surreptitiously acknowledging in a public way the *actual* prevalence of sex between men in CCC camps is really less important for my purposes than is the fact that suggestive homoerotic imagery and homoerotic innuendo appear to have been common aspects of the camp culture of camp life in the CCC. In any event, athletics provided an obvious context in which enrollees could focus attention on the condition of their physique and the physiques of their fellow corpsmen.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that bodybuilding and other aspects of the physical culture movement, including many of its erotically-charged illustrated publications, quickly gained popularity among enrollees in the CCC. Corps leaders counseled enrollees to strengthen their bodies as a

means of strengthening their characters, and enrollees responded to the advice enthusiastically. In January 1934 James Ross, an enrollee from Company 1618 in Clinton, Michigan, submitted a request to the editors of *Happy Days* for more articles on “physical culture.” “One hears so much about this on every hand, nearly everyone is interested in this topic and indeed it is the hobby of a great number of Civilian Conservation youths.”³⁹ For him and others one presumes, bodybuilding was a sensible outgrowth of the official attention to physical improvement that the CCC lavished on the maturing bodies of enrollees when its camp physicians weighed, measured, and inspected them at least once every month. Yet there is also evidence that physical culture enthusiasts walked an extraordinarily fine line between *appreciating* the male form and *eroticizing* it.

Throughout its more than forty-year history, the publishers of *Physical Culture* repeatedly denied accusations that they were intentionally pandering to the prurience of sexually “deviant” men by printing photographs of scantily-clad physique models in the pages of a magazine ostensibly dedicated to all that was healthy and wholesome. Among others, the magazine’s publisher, Bernarr Macfadden, was very outspoken on this point. At least as far as he was concerned, any “nastiness” to be found in the beauty form of the nude male body “exists in the minds of those who view it, and those who possess such vulgar minds are the enemies of everything clean, wholesome, and elevating.”⁴⁰ Macfadden’s virulent protestations against any homoerotic reading of them aside, physique magazines such as *Physical Culture* indisputably prepared the way for the industry in gay male pornography that flourished by the middle of the twentieth century. Gay men in urban areas are known to have ogled the titillating images in physique magazines including *Physical Culture* almost from the moment they first hit newsstands at the turn of the century; fifty years later such magazines served similar purposes for thousands of gay GIs who found the magazines’ plausible ambiguity equally useful during the Second World War.⁴¹ In the interim, *Physical Culture* maintained a steady readership, part of which was made up of devotees among the ranks of the Civilian Conservation Corps. By the mid-1930s, physique magazines circulated widely among enrollees in CCC camps. In fact, *Physical Culture* was so popular among enrollees that the War Department began supplying all 1,400 camp libraries with subscriptions to it in July 1935, making the federal government one of Macfadden’s best customers.⁴²

By 1937, the year in which James McEntee went before Congress to request that the CCC be made a permanent part of the U.S. federal government, reports of drag performances, lurid innuendo, and campy language had more or less disappeared from the pages of *Happy Days*. After four years of provisional existence as an emergency relief program, the CCC had grown into a large, comparatively well-organized operation with better-defined rules, regulations, standards of conduct, and sense of purpose. Needless to say, cultivating the camp sensibility and exploratory impulses of enrollees was not part of that purpose. To be sure, garishly clad enrollees continued to perform in women’s clothing during camp

theatricals, and scantily clad enrollees continued to harden their bodies in fierce athletic competitions. But for official purposes, images of the gendered spectacle of male homosociality that had been so prominently featured in the pages of the CCC newspaper were increasingly replaced by less titillating reporting about the triumphs of Corps projects and programs.

Nevertheless, and contrary to current assumption, young men from isolated rural areas did not necessarily have to make their way to urban centers to see the meaning of American manhood questioned and challenged in a public forum. Nor did they have to wait until they had melded into the comfortable anonymity of the city to begin to flirt with the idea of flirting with men. Almost three million young men passed through the CCC camps in just under a decade, and a majority of those were country boys. Thus this history is very much one of many queer histories of rural American life that has gone more or less unexplored.

Perhaps the most radical implication of this particular history, though, is not the part of it which can safely be included in the growing literature documenting instances of same-sex desire and “gender trouble” in American history. Instead, the most critical contribution that this essay has to offer may lie in what it says about the history of white, male *heterosexuality* in America. For even if the vast majority of young men who moved out of their adolescence in rural areas and into adult manhood by way of a term or two in the CCC never thought that they had been part of anything that could or should be considered part of “queer” history, the record strongly suggests that life in the CCC was anything but straight and narrow. As Marjorie Garber has noted, “what has become clearer and clearer is that ‘man’—the male person—is at least as artifactual as ‘woman.’”⁴³ And in examining the Civilian Conservation Corps, we get a much better sense of the queer conditions under which roughly three million young adults, many of whom both came from and returned to rural areas, began to start thinking of themselves as such—as “men.”

Notes

1. Ira Freeman, “Claims C.C.C. Prevented American Youths From Becoming Sissies,” *Happy Days*, December 9, 1933, 2.

2. On these see generally, John Donald Gustav-Wrathall, *Take a Young Stranger By the Hand: Same-Sex Relations and the YMCA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

3. James J. McEntee, *Now They Are Men: The Story of the CCC* (Washington, DC: National Home Library Foundation, 1940), 16.

4. In fact, the efficiency of the inaugural CCC enrollment process actually put similar efforts during World War I to shame. According to the same official report cited above, the War Department managed to process and deploy almost 100,000 more men during the initial CCC enrollment operation than it had during the opening days of World War I. “During the first three months of the World War, the War Department mobilized by July 1, 1917, 117,000 men in the Regular Army, 58,000 men in the National Guard and 6,000 men in the National Army, or a total of 181,000 men. By that date less than 16,000 men (mostly Regular Army units) had embarked for France. . . .” *Ibid.*, quoted by McEntee.

5. The term “peavie” refers to a tool used in logging. A “peavey” was a wooden shaft with a spike or hook near the end. This tool was used to turn and maneuver logs.

6. Federal Security Agency, *The Selection Process: A Guide for Selection Agents of the Civilian Conservation Corps* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1941), 15-16.

7. *Ibid.*
8. "Camp Paper Uncovers 'Average Rookie,'" *Happy Days*, April 21, 1934, 4.
9. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Editors of Happy Days," *Happy Days*, May 19, 1934, 1.
10. "Civics Rush For Beauty Aids As Photo Is Taken," *Happy Days*, June 16, 1934, 9.
11. *Ibid.* In the early twentieth century, cosmetics manufacturers made several failed attempts to market their products to men. By 1930, however, eyebrow pencil, lipstick, and beauty cream were almost universally associated with female beauty culture. There are several reasons why enrollees might have kept such quintessentially female items on hand in camps. There is little question, however, that they maintain their "sissy" connotation in the context of the report cited here. It seems clear to me that the author of the report intended for readers to understand this. On early attempts to popularize cosmetics for men, see Kathy Peiss, *Hope In A Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 158-166.
12. "Come on, All You Handsome Men, We Are Ready for You," *Happy Days*, June 16, 1934, 9.
13. *Ibid.*
14. "Men to Compete in Bathing Beauty Contest," *Happy Days*, September 23, 1933, 7.
15. "Handsome Lad Wins Beauty Race," *Happy Days*, February 17, 1934, 14.
16. "Sharks Preside In 'Pink Tea' Tent," *Happy Days*, August 18, 1934, 6.
17. James Zeigler, "'Pansies,' 'Sissies' and 'Farmers' Are Names of Groups in Ohio Outfit," *Happy Days*, January 20, 1934, 11.
18. "Club Members Brew Tea, Gossip, Sew—So They Say," *Happy Days*, January 13, 1934, 1.
19. "'Well, it was like this. . .,'" *Happy Days*, March 30, 1935, 11.
20. "CCC Men Would Make Good Wives, Ladies Say," *Happy Days*, June 1, 1935, 14.
21. *Ibid.* Emphasis added.
22. Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth*, reprinted in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, Fabio Cleto, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 80.
23. Good examples include George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) and Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay LA: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).
24. There actually may have only been one cat named "Oscar Wilde." The two reports appear in separate issues of *Happy Days* only a week apart and bear striking resemblance to one another. For example, both cats were reported to possess an odd number of toes—six on each front paw and four on each back paw. This, taken together with the fact that the separate reports were both attributed to camps in California could suggest either a craze among CCC enrollees for deformed cats named after foppish British aesthetes, or, more likely, sloppy, sensationalistic reporting. In any event, the two reports are attributed in print to different CCC camps. I therefore offer both citations. "'Oscar Wilde' is the Mascot of Co. 991, Coutolenc, Calif. . . .," *Happy Days*, February 10, 1934, 4; "Meet Oscar Wilde," *Happy Days*, February 17, 1934, 2.
25. R. N. Jensen, "OVERHEAD TAKES 'BISCUITS,'" *Happy Days*, August 10, 1935, 19.
26. "And What a Wedding . . .," *Happy Days*, March 9, 1935, 5.
27. According to Pete Daniel, "womanless weddings" were common in the American South throughout most of the twentieth century. As Daniel notes, they were folk dramas "featuring a town's male residents in both female and male roles, which necessitated cross-dressing. These ceremonies, always segregated, raised money for churches, civic groups, or other community endeavors and customarily were performed in school auditoriums. Town residents laughed at the spectacle of men, including the town fathers and ministers, dressing and acting as women. The characters usually included a pregnant and unattractive bride, an irate and armed father, a dim-witted groom, an inventive minister, and buxom attendants who delivered ribald commentary. Neither the participants nor the audience attributed untoward motives to the cross-dressed men. Because the script consisted of corny dialogue, the humor was based on watching prominent men act silly while dressed as women." See Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 158. The occurrence of such notably Southern phenomena as womanless weddings in camps as far away from the South as Utah can easily be explained by the fact that enrollees were often shipped cross-country to take up posts where their skills and experience were most needed.
28. "Spotlight," *Happy Days*, June 16, 1934, 11.
29. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Revised Edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 54.
30. According to Vito Russo, "In 1933, her film *She Done Him Wrong* contained two references that were typical of her style and humor. On a visit to her onetime boyfriend Chick Clark, now 'up the river,' West saunters past a jail cell that contains two men whose arms are wrapped around each other and, taking notice, she refers to them nonchalantly as 'the Cherry Sisters.' (The Cherry Sisters were a well-known vaudeville act that closed the first half of the bill and were so bad that

people often threw food at them.) In a later scene, after West has attempted to seduce Cary Grant, he tells her, 'I'd better be getting back to the mission now. Sally's father is waiting for me.' Obviously considering the possibilities of such an encounter, she responds lewdly, 'Yeah, well *that* oughta be interestin'!" Russo, 54-55.

31. "IN THE SPOTLIGHT: 'Josie' sings 'Old Man River' and 'Minnie the Moocher' Steals Show," *Happy Days*, July 1, 1933, 6.

32. "And this 'gal' put on a party for the new men of Co. 1740, Arkansas?" *Happy Days*, May 12, 1934, 14.

33. E. C. Ballintine, "Camp's Entry Misses Beauty Contest Title By a Whisker, But She Still Retains First Place in the Hearts of Her Buddies," *Happy Days*, April 28, 1934, 14.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. "No Spot for Sissies," *Happy Days*, October 20, 1934, 15.

38. For one example, see "THRU THE KNOTHOLE," *Happy Days*, April 28, 1934, 15.

39. James Ross, "Letters to the Editor," *Happy Days*, January 6, 1934, 4.

40. From Macfadden's editorial appearing in *Physical Culture*, February 1903, 150. Quoted in George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 116. In his note, Chauncey credits the work of Greg Mullins for having drawn his attention to this passage. See Greg Mullins, "Nudes, Prudes, and Pigmies: The Desirability of Disavowal in Physical Culture," *Discourse* 15 (Winter 1992): 35.

41. Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 116; Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 272.

42. "All Camps to Have 43 Magazine Subscriptions," *Happy Days*, June 1, 1935, 1.

43. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 373-374.

