

Tom Fahlstrom

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Key words: Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Chester Township – Otsego County, farming, King School

Note: The initial purpose of this interview was to obtain a first hand account of what it was like to serve in the CCC. That information and several photos were collected and are very interesting. However, perhaps an even more important story for the Otsego County Historical Society was Tom's comments related to growing up on a farm in Chester Township and going to the King School. He is a long time resident of the county and his 1 year experience in the CCC outside of the county demonstrates the economic hardship endured during the Great Depression.

Brief Biography: Tom Fahlstrom was born on August 26, 1923 in Chattanooga Tennessee. His family lived in Flint Michigan but went to Chattanooga so that his grandmother who lived there could assist with the new baby. Tom's father was A.H. Fahlstrom and his mother's name was Blanche. Tom's brother, Oscar, was two years older than him. Their younger brother was Leonard. The family moved from Flint to a farm in Chester Township Otsego County in 1930. Tom went to the King School, served in the CCC from May 1941 – July 1942, and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in August of 1942. Following his military service, Tom later worked for the Michigan DNR for 40 years and retired in 1984. He married Vera in 1944 and they have 4 children.

Background on the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC): In an effort to "put Americans back to work" during the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) enrolled more than 100,000 young Michigan men to perform a variety of conservation and reforestation projects. Between 1933 and 1942, the Michigan CCC planted 484 million trees, spent 140,000 days fighting forest fires and constructed 7,000 miles of truck trails, 504 bridges and 222 buildings. Their accomplishments also revitalized the Michigan state park system, helping to establish Isle Royale National Park and improve campgrounds in Michigan's national forests.

With the U.S. entry into World War II, the CCC was discontinued in 1942.

See also attached article from the Michigan Department of History, Arts, and Libraries.



Memories of the CCC: Tom Fahlstrom served in the CCC from May 1941 to July 1942 which was exactly one year, one month, and one day. He was 17 years old and had just been out of school 1 week when he started at Camp Wolverine located at Webber Lake in Cheboygan County. This was about his only

chance for employment during the Great Depression. The main focus at Camp Wolverine was the hardwood nursery. There were approximately 40 acres of seedlings that would be later transplanted in state forests. For his first three weeks at Camp Wolverine, Tom weeded the ¼ inch tall seedlings. The Camp of about 100 young men was getting ready to close up



and Tom was there for 4 months. He was paid \$30 a month of which \$25 was directly sent home to his mother who was managing the family farm in Chester Township Otsego County. The remaining \$5 could be spent on snacks sold at the Camp canteen or at weekend excursions to nearby Petoskey to see a movie. Saving some of the money was another option since living expenses at Camp were minimal. Clothing as well as room and board were provided by Uncle Sam. Tom noted that “We had good food.”

The CCC was a cooperative effort between the federal and state governments. The Camp was run by the U.S. Army but the work projects were handled by the state DNR. Transportation was provided by one or the other agency depending on the purpose of the trip. The regimentation was designed to prepare the boys for the army.

In September 1941, Tom transferred to the Camp at Higgins Lake. There were about 200 men and all but 15 of them were World War I veterans. Tom’s father, who was a WWI veteran, was also at the Camp. Having a father and his two sons at the same camp was very unusual.



Tom’s father, A.H. Fahlstrom, was a “rated man” which meant his carpentry skills and other work experience allowed him to earn more money. He was paid \$45 a month which was 50% more than the enrollees. A.H. spent a total of three years in the CCC with most of that time at the Pigeon River camp.

Tom served as the 2nd cook for two weeks and then the baker quit. He ended up being the new baker and made pies, cookies, and bread. When asked if he was good at baking, Tom replied. “They liked it, they ate it.”

His typical workday began with revelry at 7:00 a.m. followed by KP duty from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. Unless he was on KP duty, Tom could get approved leave to go home on weekends and holidays. He didn’t have a car so he hitch hiked. Because he was wearing

a military uniform, people would pick him up and give him a ride back to Gaylord. Tom's father would go home most weekends and Tom usually went every other week end to help with the farm chores.

During off work hours, the canteen offered entertainment options such as pool tables and card games. Tom became a good pool player. There also was a library with lots of book, magazines, and newspapers. No church services were held at camp.

During the winter months, the enrollees at Camp Wolverine were assigned to TSI an acronym for Timber Stand Improvement. They removed dead trees on state land. At Camp Higgins, Tom worked on maps of state owned land. The maps included lake depths which could be easily measured when the lakes were frozen. Tom worked on a base map for Clare County and has a base map of Otsego County. He gained skills doing these projects which required precise work. "Know what you're doing and do it right", he commented. A WWI veteran taught Tom to draw, make posters, and do lettering – a skill that he would use for many years to come as a sign painter for the State of Michigan. He also did commercial lettering for trucks.

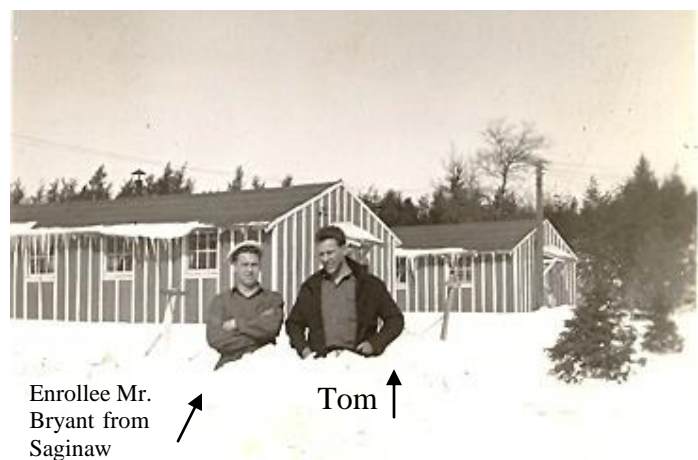
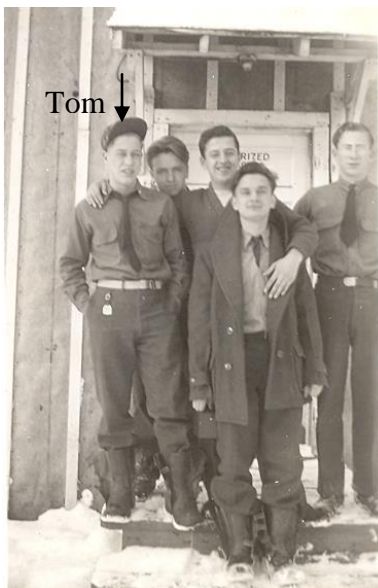
Overall, Tom said he enjoyed his 13 month experience in the CCC. He made good friends, earned steady pay, and learned useful skills.



Here are some photos of the buildings and people at Camp Higgins. The mess hall could accommodate about 200 people and had long tables with benches. The officers ate in a separate room. The enrollees that served them were nicknamed "Dog robbers".

Camp Wolverine had 4 bunk houses with 50 people each. Camp Higgins had 4 or 5 bunk houses.

Other buildings include a cook shanty, an infirmary with 4 – 6 beds, a library, and canteen. The buildings were assembled in a way to allow them to be disassembled and moved to a different location. Electricity was provided by a diesel generator.



Growing up on a farm in Otsego County:

When Tom was about 7 years old, the Fahlstrom family moved to the King Farm located in section 16 of Chester Township. They farmed half of the 120 acre farm. There wasn't electricity until 1941 and they never had a telephone. They got their first tractor in 1939 but still kept horses for cultivating and other farm chores. They grew alfalfa and corn for the livestock. They had 10 to 15 acres of potatoes which they sold directly from the field to a trucker for as low as 9 cents a bushel. The dairy cows produced cream that was sold and generated income for the family. Because there was no refrigeration to keep the excess milk fresh, it was fed to the hogs. Pigs provided good income and were sold in the spring when 6 six weeks old. Chickens were a steady source of eggs and meat.

Tom attended the King School which was located next to his house. At one time, there were 52 students and only one teacher.

Later, Tom and his wife Vera bought the family farm and leased it out for someone else to farm. Tom worked at the DNR and moved to Gaylord in 1950.