

## Review

*James Allum, City of Winnipeg*

Barbara W. Sommer, *Hard Work and a Good Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Minnesota*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008. 216pp. ISBN: 0873516125.

As an erstwhile academic, I once had the privilege (some might say the luxury) of spending copious hours reading about past events, including the Great Depression and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the subject of Barbara W. Sommer's *Hard Work and a Good Deal*. Though much of what I read about the "dirty thirties" in those bygone days was eminently forgettable, Sommer's book held significant promise for two good reasons: the book is advertised as both a "local" and an "oral" history – a novel if not entirely unique approach to a well-worn topic. I'm pleased to report that the book delivers on both counts, but perhaps not as well on the second which is a bit odd given the promotional material on the jacket-cover. Still, the result remains unchanged: this is a fine book with or without the oral history component.

In *Hard Work and a Good Deal*, Sommer tells the story of Minnesota's experience with the CCC, perhaps the most famous of all the New Deal programs established during Franklin Roosevelt's presidency. Organized by topic rather than chronologically, three themes emerge from Sommer's depiction of the CCC in Minnesota. The first of these relates to the value of discipline, both as a means of requiring deference to authority and as a personal attribute. Given the pivotal role of the U.S. Army in the development of the CCC, discipline was central not only to the operation of each camp, but to the value of work as a measure of self-worth. Though Sommer rejects the notion that the camps were "quasi-military," there is no doubt that the military discipline utilized at the camps prepared "the boys" of the CCC to become men in World War II.

A second theme in the book relates to inclusion, though this should not be confused with either tolerance or equity. Though the legislation creating the CCC included an explicit anti-discrimination clause, blacks were either organized into separate companies or segregated from white workers in so-called "mixed" camps. Likewise, a separate Indian division (CCC-ID) was operated by the Department of Indian Affairs for America's most marginalized people. Like the CCC's emphasis on discipline to instill deference to authority, the inclusion of minorities in the CCC reflected traditional segregationist thinking rather than an earnest attempt to promote racial integration in the United States.

A third theme in the book concerns the conservationist ideal that served as the noble goal of the CCC. Drawing on a history of conservationist thinking that

dated back more than a century, Roosevelt understood that there was much work (and consequent employment) to be found in repairing nature's bounty after generations of environmental degradation. To that end, the camps in Minnesota focused mostly, but not exclusively, on forest conservation, though projects relating to water conservation, park development, and soil erosion were also undertaken. While many of Minnesota's beautiful state parks can be traced back to the work of the CCC, the sad reality is that the conservationist impulse faded as the depression-era crisis passed.

*Hard Work and A Good Deal* is exceedingly well written, very well documented, and highly educational in relation to Minnesota's particular experience with the CCC. Indeed, the only problem – to the degree that it is a problem at all – is that the contribution of the oral record to the book is underwhelming at best. The narrative is driven by the usual assortment of written primary and secondary sources rather than by the oral testimony of the camp workers. Moreover, the vast majority of the oral testimony - while interesting enough - is merely used for the purposes of confirmation rather than to contrast with the written record, fill in gaps in our knowledge, or otherwise elucidate on a point made in the text. And yet, even if the book does not quite come as advertised, it has very little impact on my final judgment that this is a very good book. Indeed a proper characterization of the book might simply be that it was mighty hard work for the author and a very good deal for the reader.