

It's a Great Life

Robert L. Miller, 1937

My Life - Before going

There is no need to mention much of my life before I enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps. It is sufficient to say that the six months previous to my enlistment were most unsatisfactory, from both a financial and mental standpoint. I was often hungry, and almost constantly broke.

When I finally enrolled in this great enterprise at Sacramento, California, in October, 1933, I was conscious of just one thing—I would be fed, clothed and sheltered during the coming winter. Also I would receive enough actual cash each month to provide the few luxuries I desired. Why I went

The two weeks I had to wait between the time I enrolled and the day we were to leave for camp were given over to much thinking. I began to wonder what kind of a life I was going to live for the next six months. Several questions flashed through my mind. Would I make friends with my fellow members? What kind of work would I be doing? Would I be able to "take it"? This last question was by far the most important to me.

Let me pause for a moment to give you a short character analysis of myself. For years I had been conscious of an inferiority complex that had a firm grip on me. I had tried to hide this complex beneath an outer coating of egotism. To a certain extent I had been successful—I had fooled nearly everyone but myself. Try as I may, I could not overcome the feeling that I was just a little inferior to my fellow men. I did not credit myself with the quality of a leader among men, but how I longed for that virtue. I had always been content to sit back and let someone else get ahead while I wished I were in his boots. It was in this frame of mind that I joined seventy other young men on the morning of October 26, to leave for our camp in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

Our arrival at camp that same evening was an event that I shall never forget. I was pleasantly surprised at the feeling of genuine hospitality and good cheer that existed among the older members of the company, and reached out to greet we new comers. I had expected a much different atmosphere, and I am ashamed to admit I arrived in camp with a chip on my shoulder. This feeling was soon lost in my pleasant surrounding.

Some of my self-imposed questions were answered in the first two weeks of camp life. Yes, I could make friends with my fellows, and quite easily too. Most of the friendships that I made early in my enlistment have lasted to this day.

The second question to be answered early in the game was, could I take it? I found that I could and

liked it. I could work with these boys, play with them, argue with them and hold up my end. They seemed to like me, and I knew I was fond of them.

This new life had a grip on me, and for the first time in months I was really happy. Good food, plenty of sleep, interesting work and genial companions had created quite a change—my mind was at peace.

One night I went to bed rather early after a hard day's work. Something was wrong, and I didn't fall asleep right away as was my usual custom. My thoughts, when simmered down, were something like this—Here I have a big chance to see if I'm going to go ahead in this world, or be just one of the crowd the rest of my life. I'm just one man in a group of two hundred young fellows, and I have just as good a chance as any of the others. So here goes, from now on I'm going to try for advancement—and I'm going to succeed. Such were my thoughts that night, for the first time I realized I had the same chance as the rest to make good.

Next morning in the light of day, things did not look so promising as I had pictured them during the night. But I now had the determination. All I needed was a starting point. In a few days I was to have my start, but it was a queer beginning.

At various times in my life I had done a bit of wrestling, and once or twice had engaged in bouts at camp. I was asked to wrestle a boy in our camp. I agreed, not knowing who my opponent was to be. He was not selected until the day of the fight, and when I heard his name I wanted to back out. Pride alone kept me from calling off the bout. My opponent was a huge fellow, weighing twenty-two pounds more than I, and a good three inches taller. No matter how I looked at it, I could picture only a massacre with myself on the losing end. It wasn't fear that made me want to back out, but I dreaded the thought of defeat in front of three or four hundred people.

I climbed into the ring that night a very doubtful, but determined young man. At least I would put up a good fight. When the bout was over and I emerged the victor, I knew immediately that I had made my start. I was terribly stiff and sore, but very proud and happy. Sleep did not come easily that night. I was too excited. I kept saying to myself, "I've done it, I'm on my way." Why a physical victory should put me mentally at ease I do not know, but it did.

At sometime or other, most of us have a friend that has enough interest in our well-being to try to bring us back on the right path after we have gone astray. So it was in my case. There resides in Oakland a

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## It's a Great Life (Continued)

*This girl told me I'd become conceited.*

young lady whom I have known for several years. As it was only a short distance from camp to Oakland, I was frequently a weekend visitor at her home.

One Sunday afternoon, this young lady and I sat talking in the living room of her home. As we had always been very outspoken with each other, I was not surprised when she said she was going to tell me a few things. By the time she had finished I'm afraid my face was a trifle red. She told me that in the last month I had changed from a quiet, unassuming young man to a conceited, self-centered prude. She topped it off by saying she could get along very nicely without my company until I recovered from my attack of pig-headedness. That night I slept very little, spending most of the night trying to get things straight in my mind. Out of the chaos of thoughts that came to me I realized two things. First, the young lady was indeed a friend and she had spoken harshly to try to bring me to my senses. Secondly, I realized that my newfound success had gone to my head, and I was making a perfect fool of myself.

For several days I pondered over my problem with no tangible result. It appeared to me that my job was to strike a happy medium between my old self and this new person that had taken possession of me. I didn't want to go back to the old way, and it was evident that I couldn't continue as I had been doing. The only solution was for me to find an average.

Unconsciously I must have succeeded. Three weeks later when I again visited the young lady for the weekend, she complimented me on my success. She claimed that I was an entirely new person, and she was very pleased. That Sunday night I returned to camp a very happy young man.

A short time later, our Educational Advisor arrived in camp, and that evening I was told I had been appointed his assistant. Out of a group of two hundred young men I had been chosen for a position of real importance.

In a little less than six months I had literally found myself. For twenty-two years I had doubted my right to call myself a man. My fight had been a long one, and here, in six short months I had proved to myself that I was really a man. A great deal of my success I owe to this certain young lady who brought me back on the right path. But if I had not joined the Civilian Conservation Corps I never would have made a start.

I shall try to convey to you Just what the Civilian Conservation Corps has meant to me. There are a

*I gained self-respect*

great many things of which I could tell, but I shall write of only the most important. The rest I shall keep deep down in my heart. First of all, by enrolling in President Roosevelt's peace time army! I managed to retain my self respect. I did not have to become either a parasite, living off my relatives, or a professional bum. In other words, it gave me a chance to stand on my own two feet and make my own way in the world.

*Changes in me*

Then it gave me the opportunity to make friendships that will live forever. Nine months of living in close contact with young men of my own age could hardly pass without at least a few lasting friendships.

*I developed physically.*

I had an excellent chance to develop myself physically. Many months of work in the sun have put layers of muscle on my body and turned my skin a dark tan.

*I gained memories.*

But my memories, those golden thoughts that I shall keep forever, are my most valued and treasured keepsake. My album is full of pictures, each one serving as only a starting point for a long journey into the land of happy days. Days of work in the woods, nights around the fire in the barracks, a trick played on an innocent chap, an all day hike with some of my friends, a fishing trip with one of my pals, the rush for the mess hall when the gong sounds, all of these thoughts are dear to me, and I feel sure that the next few months will bring countless more treasures with each passing day.

*I give credit to*

These things I have mentioned are benefits derived by every young man who has been a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps. But my personal achievement is the one glorious gift I have received from my association with the young men of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

I enrolled as a boy, unsteady, groping, unsure. I wanted something, but could not describe it or discover a means for attaining it. Then I discovered what it was I was seeking—it was the right to call myself a man. My life at camp has given me that right, and I shall be ever grateful to President Roosevelt and the C.C.C. Now that I am a man, with my feet firmly planted on the steps of life, I feel sure of a reasonable amount of success.

If, in my humble way I have made you realize what the Civilian Conservation Corps has done for me, I am very happy. I do not claim any honor for the change that occurred in me, it just had to be. I'm only deeply thankful that I had the chance to get acquainted with the real me.

So in parting I say "Thank God for President Roosevelt and his C.C.C. I shall never forget you."

Source: *It's a Great Life* by Robert L. Miller, Company 999 C.C.C., Pine Grove, California. New Deal Network website: <http://newdeal.feri.org/cc/c/cc009.htm>

*I now felt like a man.*