



BUILDING TRAILS ACROSS TEXAS

Work corps follows in the footsteps of the CCC.

By Kathryn Hunter

OPPOSITE PHOTO BY EARL NOTTINGHAM/TPWD; THIS PAGE COURTESY SAVANNAH HARTE

THE SOUND OF A HAMMER breaks the stillness of the morning. Metal on metal, a regular beat. Someone calls out, and another voice answers with laughter. One might wonder, looking down the trail at Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area, whether the figures glimpsed through the trees are ghosts of the century past, come to rebuild the rails that were scrapped in 1942.

But then a generator starts, followed by the high whine of an electric drill. These laborers are young, and their leaders, calling out instructions to the other eight members of the crew, are both women. This is the Trails Across Texas crew, a program of AmeriCorps and the American YouthWorks Environmental Corps. They are here to restore Old Tunnel's badly eroded nature trail, used each year by as many as 20,000 visitors who come to watch bats emerge from the abandoned railroad tunnel at dusk.

"When you see a crew at work like this, you see how much effort goes into every yard of trail," says Erick Hetzel, Environmental Corps staff trainer. Like most of the E-Corps staff, he is a former crew member. "When we show up sometimes people don't know what they're getting, but at the end we've never had a project stop or park staff member not be impressed by what we get done."

Spread out along the 100-yard slope, individual crew members carry out their tasks with an efficiency that seems impossible given the number of simultaneous operations. It's like watching a colony of ants build a mound, except these ants are speaking in mathematical terms. If you were to ask members of the crew what they are doing, they would tell you how many inches the step they're building needs to be separated from the one above, or the manner in which water bars, grade dips and check steps are being used to direct water from the trail.

The crew is young, ranging in age from 21 to 28, but they have quickly become experts in trail-building, a field that is a fusion of many trades and skills. Created in 2009 to work exclusively on Texas Parks and Wildlife projects, the Trails Across Texas crew has completed several projects to date, with more scheduled this year.

In form and in function, E-Corps crews have been called the "grandchildren" of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the largest and most well-known conservation corps movement in the U.S. The CCC, which began in 1933 under Roosevelt's New Deal legislation and ended in 1942, put nearly 3.5 million unemployed, single men from the ages of 18 to 25 to work. Many of the structures and monuments built by the CCC in Texas state parks are still in use today, testament to the craftsmanship of the men who constructed them.

"For years, the old-time CCCers have lobbied for the CCC to be



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reborn," says Janelle Taylor, a TPWD employee who coordinates CCC reunions and records CCC oral histories. "With American YouthWorks Environmental Corps, their wish is nearly true."

As a program, E-Corps has worked in Texas state parks, natural areas and wildlife management areas, as well as many Travis County parks and other facilities, since 1994. In addition to trail-building, E-Corps crews participate in invasive species removal, habitat restoration, revegetation, stonework and conservation education. In all projects, the organization focuses on sustainability, safety and quality. When possible, field-found materials are used and native seeds are planted.

"We're trying to minimize our impact," Hetzel says. "A trail is essentially a scar, and if you're constantly washing dirt down, it's just getting worse — it's becoming an open wound. Anybody can cut a line from A to B, but we do it in a way that's not going to negatively impact the surrounding environment."

Andy Goldbloom, TPWD Recreational Trail Program and Boating Access Program manager, schedules the corps' work in state facilities each year. Jobs previously allocated to individual contractors are now reserved for E-Corps crews, which produce dependable and high-quality results.

"When they were here in the spring, it was raining and they were up to their knees in mud, carrying their tools," says Elaine Weaver, trail ranger at Cooper Lake State Park, where E-Corps crews made repairs to a heavily used equestrian trail. "The type of repairs they do, it was the first time they've ever been done. They've held, and our soil is highly erodible. We've been getting all kind of storms and rains, and they're still pristine."



— moving rocks and heavy timbers, hammering rebar, shoveling dirt, installing various steps and water bars. But the crew hasn't stopped for a minute. In fact, they seem to be enjoying themselves.

"The kind of work we're doing is improving the world, and it's hard to find jobs like that," says program coordinator Parc Smith, who has worked with E-Corps since its inception. He explains how one crew member, Luca Masters, wears his E-Corps hardhat everywhere he goes. "I'll see him at a bus stop in town, and he'll still have it on. For him it's a badge of honor."



OPPOSITE: Crew members work together to move rocks at Caprock Canyons State Park. **THIS PAGE:** Workdays start early with calisthenics (left), followed by an eight- or nine-hour shift on the trail. After work, E-Corps members cook dinner and clean up.

E-Corps members may find their way to the program for different reasons — an Internet search for a job in conservation, a year off from college or careers, a desire to live and work in the outdoors, an opportunity to learn a wide range of skills like carpentry and arboriculture — but they all seem to share the same deep satisfaction in hard work. Theirs is a generation often perceived as troubled, lazy, dependent on air-conditioning and MP3 players, yet here they are,

camping and working for 11 days at a time without running water or cell phone reception.

"I definitely feel like we're part of the legacy of building the park system, of improving parks, of making them more than they ever were. And preserving them, too," crew member Casey Abell says. "The more trails that are built and the more people that get into the park systems, the more people will want to preserve all these things."

AmeriCorps members, who receive a modest living stipend and a \$5,000 grant for future study or educational loans, serve an initial six-month term with the option to extend for another year, which many accept. Many also continue working in conservation after their term of service, finding permanent employment with government or nonprofit entities, even though few may have begun with those career paths in mind.

American YouthWorks also operates a charter high school for students working on their high school diplomas. In the summer, students from this program join E-Corps crews in conservation projects. A significant number of the students come from low-income households, and many have never visited a state or national park, or seen the Milky Way in the

night sky. Some have never left the city limits.

"Those kids could not be further from their comfort zones," Hetzel says. In 2008, one crew worked on a backcountry project in the Chisos Basin of Big Bend National Park. "It was tough on them, but all we heard for the next year was 'If you're lucky, you get to do this.'"

Hetzel continues, "Even if they don't continue trail-building or become a land steward, they think about greater possibilities. They think, 'What else can I do?'"

E-Corps crews have had opportunities to meet their predecessors. Since 2003, TPWD has held four large statewide reunions for former CCC members and their families. E-Corps crews have helped to administer the events, demonstrating CCC-era masonry and building techniques to attendees. E-Corps members were able to speak individually with CCCers, now in their 80s or 90s, who, despite having a lifetime of experiences, still refer to those one or two years of their youth as one of the most important periods in their lives.

"Hearing the stories of the old CCC members is important for our members," Smith says. "One of our main goals with the program is to turn around the public perception that young people are not of value. These crews are doing significant work to build our state infrastructure. What they do, they're going to leave behind for generations to come."

At 79 years old, John Hibbitts is currently the oldest member of E-Corps and AmeriCorps. He emigrated from England in 1959 to work as a stonemason on the Washington National Cathedral. Even then, stonemasonry was being called a "dying art," and there was a need for skilled craftsmen. Now there are probably fewer than 35 expert stonemasons in the United States, Hibbitts says, and most are over 50 years old.

Four years ago, Hibbitts volunteered with E-Corps in Austin to teach a stone masonry apprenticeship program. He began with one student, and is currently working with 13.

When asked why he teaches the program, Hibbitts says, "I would like to leave something of value. I will be 80 next year, and I'm not really sure how much longer I've got, but I want to do what I possibly can to make the world slightly better, because I can't take anything with me. What I'd like to see is a good school of masonry."

Hibbitts and Smith are full of ideas for the future — adding an apprenticeship program for blacksmithing, continuing restoration work on colonial missions in San Antonio, improving teaching techniques and offering additional possibilities to their students, the

youth who perhaps need them the most. E-Corps is just one facet of American YouthWorks' growing program.

For the Trails Across Texas crew at Old Tunnel, the work day is ending. The tools are put away, the crew is drifting slowly back to their campsite, and there's a sense of camaraderie in the air as palpable and timeless as the trees and rocks and flowing water of this place that has been designed more by nature's hand than by man's. The bats will emerge in half an hour, but for now there are just the vestiges of the past — triumphs and disappointments alike — and the brightness of things to come. ★

BELOW: The E-Corps crew takes a break for a group portrait at Old Tunnel Wildlife Management Area.



E-CORPS PROJECT LIST

2009

- 1 **BASTROP STATE PARK:** Made trail sustainability improvements
- 2 **HUNTSVILLE STATE PARK:** Worked on boardwalk trail in areas around Lake Raven and Alligator Branch Creek
- 3 **MARTIN DIES JR. STATE PARK:** Re-established route for Paddling Trail after Hurricane Ike damage
- 4 **COOPER LAKE STATE PARK:** Designed and built sustainable routes for equestrian trail system
- 5 **PALMETTO STATE PARK:** Constructed new wheelchair-accessible trail and bicycle trail along San Marcos River
- 6 **CAPROCK CANYONS STATE PARK:** Constructed stairs of native stone to repair erosion-damaged trail system
- 7 **MCKINNEY FALLS STATE PARK:** Constructed new bridge and trail erosion control features
- 8 **OLD TUNNEL WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA:** Constructed stairs for trail system
- 9 **BIG BEND RANCH STATE PARK:** Re-established route through Rancherías Canyon

2010

- 1 **BASTROP STATE PARK:** Continued trail restoration work
- 2 **COOPER LAKE STATE PARK:** Construction of sustainable creek crossings, new trail routes and rehabbing of closed trails
- 3 **CAPROCK CANYONS STATE PARK:** Work on 20 miles of rail trail, including improvements to bridges and tunnels
- 4 **PALMETTO STATE PARK:** Continued construction on trail and bridges
- 5 **MERIDIAN STATE PARK:** Boardwalk and other trail improvements
- 6 **HUNTSVILLE STATE PARK:** More boardwalk work
- 7 **MCKINNEY FALLS STATE PARK:** Volunteer trail building and maintenance project
- 8 **OLD TUNNEL WMA:** Volunteer trail building and maintenance project
- 9 **SAN ANGELO STATE PARK:** Reroute of Riverview outlook trail



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