

# Breaking Ground

The secret story of queer pioneers  
in the Civilian Conservation Corps.



BY NORA NEUS



On any given Spring day in Homerville, Georgia—a tiny town so far south it’s almost on the Florida border—odds were good that Agnes Culpepper was working in the forest. It was 1934, in the throes of the Great Depression, but Agnes was lucky to have a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps.

She was a brush firefighter, adept at using a “fireflap” tool to swat out the flames along the fireline, reported the CCC newspaper, *Happy Days*, in an April 1934 article. And she was extremely popular: “Miss Culpepper is a favorite of all the boys in the camp,” the article wrote. “Her admirers often tease her by calling her the Fire Flapper,” a hint not only at her job but at the attractive flapper dancers of the 1920s.

But on one leisurely afternoon, Agnes was somewhere else entirely: a beauty pageant stage in town, competing to become Miss Clinch County 1934.

About to take to the stage, Agnes was winded, having run straight from a tennis game at the CCC camp. Her fellow CCC members in Company 1413 had sponsored her entrance into the competition, and many were in attendance. Once eyes turned toward her, she “captured the hearts of the entire assemblage,” *Happy Days* reported.

“Her wistful smiles and sylph-like charms immediately met with the plaudits of admirers when she appeared with other contestants on that eventful occasion,” the paper fawned.

Agnes Culpepper was just one of many beautiful women on the stage that afternoon, but within the male-only CCC, she was a rarity. Women weren’t supposed to be CCC recruits. But Agnes slipped by because she was born Curtis Culpepper, and enrolled in the CCC as one of the hundreds of thousands of men across the country who would join the Depression-era federal work program.

While the idea and language of being transgender as an identity was not understood in 1934 the same way it is today, by our modern conceptions Agnes was a trans woman. In her time, being queer was often grounds for harassment, imprisonment, and institutionalization. But in the hundreds of CCC camps around the country (summer camp-like communities

## CHARMER



with bunk houses and campfires and mess halls), queer people were accepted, and in cases like Agnes Culpepper’s, even celebrated.

**IF YOU’VE EVER VISITED** a national or state park in America, you’ve almost certainly benefited from the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps. In the nine years of the program’s existence (from 1933 to 1942), young recruits developed 800 state parks, created about 52,000 public campgrounds, built 46,000 bridges, bushwhacked 125,000 miles of roads and trails, planted between 2 and 3 billion trees, and more.

Visitors at Sequoia National Park can still see the CCC-built ranger stations, lookout towers, and cabins standing today. Hikers in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park cross the four-arch CCC-built Elkmont Bridge. And hungry families at Shenandoah National Park can enjoy a meal at the CCC-built picnic grounds that overlook miles of forest.

The federal work program began as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. Hundreds of thousands of young men needed jobs, and America was desperately in need of environmental conserva-

◀ *Members of the CCC at work in Prince George’s County, MD.*