

TEACHER'S GUIDE
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MISSION 5: "Up from the Dust"

A Midwestern Runaway Remembers the CCC

During the Great Depression, many young people left home to search for economic opportunity (and sometimes adventure) on the open roads of America. Jim Mitchell was a sophomore in high school when his father lost his job, sending the family into desperate financial circumstances. Running away from rural Kenosha, Wisconsin, in the winter of 1933, Mitchell eventually joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a federal government program for unemployed youth. In this interview, Mitchell recalls his reasons for joining the CCC and details the life it offered him.

In the CCC you not only learned to live with other guys, you had to go out with a crew and haul logs together. You learned to work as a team.

You worked alongside state foresters who took no nonsense from you. They wanted a day's work and they got it. We had a thousand and one different jobs, from climbing trees to surveying parks. You learned to do a job and do it well. It gave you confidence when you started to become accepted by your peers and to fit in with them.

You had three square meals a day with good food and a good place to sleep. On the road you spent all your time wondering about whether you were going to eat. If you worked it wasn't useful work but just for food. To this day I can go and see parks that we built in the CCC, I can see trees that we planted. It's a living legacy. You didn't have a living legacy on the road.

I stayed in the CCC for two years getting thirty dollars a month. At last I could bring some help to my family. My first letter gave me a big boost:

"Dear son, I want you to know how grateful we are to you and proud, too. The \$25 we get each month goes a long way in holding us together. It's good to look Dimitri in the eye and plunk down cash for groceries, and not be obliged to Merriweather for the rent."

For the first time I felt good about myself.

Source: Errol Lincoln Uys, *Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 259-261.

