

The She-She-She Camps of the Great Depression

Jane Kahramanidis looks at Eleanor Roosevelt's attempts to keep the women of America busy during the Great Depression

IT WAS A CLOUDY June morning in 1933 as 17 young women, 20 to 35 years of age, boarded a bus in New York City. None of them knew what to expect at the end of their journey and, for most, it was their first trip into the country.

Each woman, victimized by the Great Depression, had been determined by the government to be appropriately destitute, single and unemployed to qualify for a camp vacation at the taxpayer's expense. In fact, this group, consisting of unemployed stenographers, clerks, saleswomen, seamstresses, factory workers and a dancer was the first to begin a New Deal program for jobless women that would become confused in its mission and mired in controversy, but would help more than 8,000 women in 90 sites across the US from 1933 to 1937.

So why in the midst of the Great Depression were precious resources spent to send unemployed women on vacation? The answer lies somewhere between the agenda of Eleanor Roosevelt and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

The CCC was one of the most popular and successful New Deal programs. Two and a half million young men from all over the Depression-ravaged US worked in state forests doing conservation work. They lived in camps and earned one dollar a day. President Franklin Roosevelt especially cherished this project because it championed both his passion for rural

life and the philosophy of William James, who deemed this sort of program as the "moral equivalency of war". Although administered by the Army, the camps were not to be militaristic because the Administration did not want

Plight of Jobless Women

Indeed, shocking stories about women sleeping in subway tunnels and "tramping" proliferated in the early '30s. Two million women across the country sought jobs. Why weren't women in the

soup lines? Activist Helena Weed of the National Women's Party answered, "Men thronged the bread lines while women hid their plight."

Minnesotan writer/feminist, Meridel Le Sueur, reported that women "will go for weeks verging on starvation, crawling in some hole, going through the streets ashamed, sitting in libraries, parks going for days without speaking to a living soul like some exiled beast."

Hilda W. Smith, New Deal Education Specialist, said, "People were hungry all over the country. I know, I went to see some of our students in New York, and they showed what they had for supper. They opened the oven, and they were cooking a little puppy they had picked up on the street."

The First Lady was especially aware of the plight of unemployed women in New York City. She initiated the "room service" program at the headquarters of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) where

jobless women went to get clothes, food and job information. Days after the inauguration she visited this program and several other charity centers in New York designed to help unemployed women. She called on the Salva-



Above: President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor Roosevelt pose on a train caboose near Denver, Colorado in this undated photograph. Below: Eleanor Roosevelt addresses the women at a She-She-She Camp for unemployed women, Bear Mountain, State Park, New York 1933.



any embarrassing semblance to "Hitler Youth". The "tree armies" kept an emerging young male population occupied and out of the job market. But, "what about the women?" asked Eleanor Roosevelt.

gram. Those in the Administration supportive of the program included: Harry Hopkins, FERA Director; Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor and especially Hilda W. Smith, who would officially join the New Deal Administration as Specialist in Adult Education.

Smith started her new position in September 1933 with instructions from Hopkins to “do something” for jobless women. Smith was eminently qualified for this job as she had taught at Bryn Mawr College and established the famous Bryn Mawr Summer School for Working Women in 1921. Desirous of expanding the experience to include more educational opportunities, and workers’ education, Smith worked to develop a more defined purpose to the camps apart from health and relaxation. It would take several months of tireless promotional work to activate the program.

In November 1933, Mrs. Roosevelt and Ellen Woodward, FERA Women’s Director, organized an all-day conference with 100 women from government and women’s organizations with the mission of planning a national camp program to help unemployed women. Although the conference participants were unsure of funding, they put together a plan that would utilize empty camps, hotels, schools and any other donated buildings and provide vocational training, health education and recreation. Smith also wanted to teach “workers’ education”, a term that had a strong communist association. She related years later, “I hardly dared mention it because it was so unpopular.”

However, the program failed to get off the ground. Smith addressed the FERA field representatives in February 1934 and met opposition. Participants complained there would be “serious discipline problems if women were brought together to live.” Smith then published a pamphlet, “The Woman with the Worn out Shoes”, depicting the plight of the

jobless woman and recommending camps as a way to solve this problem. Half of the FERA field representatives polled said they had no interest or need for such a program in their states. It wasn’t until April 1934 after another conference that the plan was finally approved.

Smith and Roosevelt held a press conference announcing their program which was “intended to serve as social and educational laboratories (from which) women will go forth to cope more intelli-



Above: “The Whole School — Students and Faculty”, the Resident School for Unemployed Women in Oberlin, Ohio. Below: Negro Camp for Unemployed Women in Atlanta, GA from July 1934.

(Images courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library).



gently and with renewed strength and courage for their special problems.” A few weeks later, 28 camps in 26 states began operation. The camps were to be run by the participating states and federally funded, however Smith would not have authority over their management or curriculum offerings.

There were 90 camps scattered across the country by 1936. Each reflected the different challenges and cultures indigenous to their locations and depended heavily upon available local resources and talent. There were stories of com-

munities cleaning old facilities and donating bedding, clothes, food and other necessities for the women. North Dakota Indian women left their reservation for the first time to attend a camp program. Barnard College in New York City hosted unemployed union women. Oberlin College welcomed clerical workers into its Summer School for Office Workers. The YWCA in Philadelphia provided space for 40 women to live and study. Black sharecropper women studied at an Arkansas agricultural college. Unemployed professional women in New Jersey attended a special program. Rented houses provided unemployed women instruction in housekeeping skills in Michigan and Ozark women attended literacy classes.

Controversy

However controversies raged. In a meeting in the morning of 2 July 1936, the American Legion of Rockland County accused Camp Tera of using Federal funds to promote communism.

Camp Tera Director, Bernice Miller, denied the charge. “The campers were permitted the completest freedom to say and discuss what they pleased,” she said, “and sing whatever songs they wanted to.” Some, Miller admitted were “of communist and socialist persuasion.” However most supported the current government.

Specifically the complaints were that the “Internationale” and other radical satires were sung, communist speeches were made and controversial material read. Critics complained that “a gate had been put up to keep visitors out and the communist practices secret.”

Embarrassing events plagued the program. There was a riot in a Montana mountain camp that took several hours to subdue. Women from Camp Tera “escaped” and went to a men’s CCC camp nearby. Harry Gersh, teacher at Camp Tera said, “It was a most

tion Army's Unemployed Girls' Hostel, where women could live, and the New York League of Girl's Clubs canteen service, which was similar to the WTUL's. However, resources for these private charities were strained.

Opening a Model Camp

Mrs. Roosevelt wasted no time after her husband's inauguration that March of 1933 activating her agenda. She enthusiastically supported the CCC plan, and she and her feminist friends hoped to establish something similar for women. But what exactly did they have in mind?

Mrs. Roosevelt had just finished reading the popular book *Prohibiting Poverty* by Prestonia Mann Martin, granddaughter of Horace Mann, who advocated a utopian concept where the nation's youth, men and women, would work for eight years and produce the necessary products and services for the rest of the population. This philosophy fit perfectly into her desire for utopian planning and experimentation. "It may be possible to try out some of these ideas under the emergency relief," said the First Lady.

In an effort to be included in the initial CCC funding that March 1933, Hilda W. Smith quickly organized a meeting of the Women's Trade Union League. The women proposed a series of schools and camps to be set up for jobless women similar to the ones operated by the YWCA. The proposal requested that the camps be funded by federal relief money and located on public property.

Most officials scorned the idea and derisively called them the "She-She-She" camps. The idea of having a camp opportunity for unemployed women would probably have died except for the relentless pursuit of the First Lady.

She knew that the New York Life Insurance Company owned an abandoned employee camp in Bear Mountain State Park near her home in Hyde Park, New York.

She asked the President for funds to start a model camp there for unemployed women. FDR gave the proposal to Harry Hopkins, Director of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), who in turn instructed New York State to fund the project with relief money. Thus Camp Tera (Temporary Emergency Relief Administration), later called Camp Jane Addams, began on 10 June 1933 with those 17 young women from New York City. But what exactly would the campers do? Would they work? Take classes? Get paid?



Above: Unemployed women campers in New Jersey off for dinner in the woods, August 1934. Below: Camp for Unemployed Women in Maine, from July 1934. (Images courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library).



Red Tape and Confusion

As Camp Tera Director, Marian Tinker, showed the women and the press around the 200-acre facility that first day, she told them that rest was to be the priority with other activities and classes added later. The plan was to have 20 girls arrive two times a week until the capacity of 200 was met. However confusion and massive red tape prevailed.

Eleanor Roosevelt first visited Camp Tera a few days after it opened, driving from Hyde Park across the Bear Mountain Bridge, and she was very disappointed to find only 30 campers. "I like this

place very much, but I think the requirements too strict," she said. Mrs. Roosevelt thought it unbelievable that it would be difficult to find 200 unemployed women in New York City who could use the help. "If they do not get the quota, the camp idea will have to be abandoned," she warned.

Suddenly on the hot seat, Walter W. Petit, field representative of the State Relief Administration explained the slow process and the method of choosing the women to go to the camp. "It is a very thorough investigation," he said. As of June 20, 700 women had applied. Petit said that the reason the camp filled so slowly was because of the "rigorousness of the qualifications for eligibility." The age was raised to 40; however the stringent qualification process remained the same.

There were a lot of questions as to the nature of the camp. Some women thought they would have to work at reforestation and wear uniforms as the men did in the CCC. "Some of the girls in the city were afraid to come because they thought they would have to work too hard and get nothing to eat but maybe some beans," explained a stenographer. Others feared losing a chance at a job. A few took one look at the camp and climbed right back on the bus to go home.

Despite the initial problems, Camp Tera gained nationwide media attention. Mail poured into the White House from all over the country with offers of properties for more camps, pleas from individuals to attend such a program and promises from government officials to organize camps if Camp Tera was successful.

Expanding the Program

Encouraged by the outpouring of support from people across the country and the reported positive experience of Camp Tera participants, proponents of the She-She-She camps renewed their efforts that fall of 1933 to expand the pro-

unnatural environment for these women... No one had thought that sexual isolation would be a problem."

Another ongoing negative condition regarding the camps was the fact that American citizens in the '30s objected to the use of public resources to support individuals, especially women. Besides, most felt, the role of a woman was in the home and it was wrong to entice her out into the public and the work force.

Camp Experience

Pauli Murray, who would later become a lawyer, writer, black civil rights activist and Episcopal priest, came to Camp Tera on the advice of her doctor for three months at the end of 1933 and beginning of 1934. Living on the edge of poverty had taken its toll on Murray and she had pleurisy.

Murray's camp experience was cut short by her clash with the camp's director, Miss Mills. Murray described Director Mills as "a raw-boned, gray-haired, authoritarian person who had driven an ambulance in World War I and attempted to run the camp on semi military lines." Murray had a copy of *Das Capital* in her trunk and when Director Mills found it, she had to leave. However, this spirited black woman would later become a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt.

After the campers finished their two- or three-month visit they were asked to comment on their experience. Most spoke effusively of how the camps had helped them overcome not only health problems, but feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. Others spoke of a new skill they learned. However some campers came with expectations that were not met. "I attended with the idea that the school, being a government school, would mean a lot in securing a job," said one camp participant. "The school was a good idea but if you can't get a job after you return home,

the government school can't mean very much." In fact between 1934 and 1935 only one fifth of the campers got jobs and then mostly in relief projects.

After returning to New York City from Camp Tera, a group of women joined the radical Workers' Alliance. Sarah Rosenberg, spokeswoman for the organization and critic of the benefit of the She-

decided it was too expensive. As the crisis of hunger and shelter eased, the camp program for women could not be justified and it ended.

Mrs. Roosevelt was never happy with either the women's or men's camps. She objected to the military aspect of the CCC and thought women should have a parallel experience. She and her feminist friends shared lofty goals for the camp program and it confused the states. Her vision was a two-year program for young men and women devoted to domestic projects such as conservation, health care, education and settlement houses. At the end of 1933 she said, "There is nothing more exciting than building a new social order."



Top: "The Swimming Pool" at a Camp for Unemployed Women in New Jersey (July 1934).

Middle: Camp for Unemployed Women in Minnesota (July 1934). Bottom: Camp for Unemployed Women in New Hampshire: "Robin Hood" (June 1934).

(Images courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library).



She-She camps said, "More than one girl says there is nothing left except suicide or tramping on the roads."

The Camps Close

On 16 August 1937 the *New York Times* reported that the women's camps would close on 1 October 1937. The National Youth Administration, then in charge of the program, criticized the objectives and necessity of the camps and

Despite the controversies related to communist influence, the extravagance of funding camp vacations, the confused mission and various embarrassing skirmishes, the She-She-She camps of the Great Depression did contribute to the well being of thousands of young women.

The friendships and direction as well as healthful living, for however brief a time, provided a welcome lift for these women. Also, perhaps most importantly, and in the words of a camper:

"It seemed like someone did have an interest in whether we lived or starved and was trying to help."