

INTRODUCTION

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S executive order creating the Civil Works Administration was in effect a declaration of war on the depression, a call to four million unemployed Americans to take up their picks and shovels and dig themselves out of the depression. The response to his call was immediate and impressive. Within six weeks more than the four million called for had enlisted. The fight opened immediately on all sectors, in every state, territory and island possession. Although this time the struggle was for peaceful ends, the methods and weapons employed were not so different from those used in real warfare. No ploughshares had to be hammered into swords. The tractors that formerly would have been used to drag cannon, now pulled road-making machinery, gouged out trenches, yanked out stumps, ditched malaria-ridden swamps, charges of dynamite blew down whole hill-sides, to widen dangerous curves on highways; sites being cleared for playgrounds at times resembled Flanders battlefields flung skywards by exploding lyddite. Hundreds of miles of trenches were opened, but now it was for the installation of water mains and sewer conduits. Useless uninhabitable buildings were demolished; unsanitary schools were pulled down and replaced with modern structures. Hospitals were built. Unemployed nurses were given jobs visiting the needy sick, caring for children. The fight was carried on into the city slums and the forgotten mountain regions in the southern states, with jobs for the jobless and medical care, education and recreation for the underprivileged. As in war, every form of technical skill was enlisted. Unemployed architects, engineers, scientists, teachers, nurses, surveyors, masons, carpenters, mechanics, as well as unskilled labor found a place in the ranks. The first campaign of this war against depression ended with the end of the Civil Works program on March 31st, a campaign lasting less than four and one-half months. The results achieved have been the reverse of those usually brought about by old-style wars. There has been construction, not destruction. Hardly a community but can show some lasting benefit derived from Civil Works activities, a street paved, a school-house reconditioned, a nursery school installed, a new playground. But the most important thing that was done, after all, was to give four million jobless men and women of these communities jobs on useful work.

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