

Interview with Woodrow W. Biddle by Chris McPherson

CM: Southern History Class

CM: You were born in Mentone?

WB: Yes

CM: Okay. You were there until 1936, and you left to Detroit for two years during service, in service?

WB: Except for two years.

CM: Except, oh okay. And you returned in 1946 to Fort Payne.

CM: Alright, uh, you grew up during the depression era. Can you tell me how your family was affected?

WB: Well, uh, after my daddy had died, and my sister died we were, that was in 1926 and 27, and when the depression came on we didn't have anything to live on. And I can remember having to work for people, helping to gather crops and things of that nature, and they didn't any money to pay us, so they paid us in whatever crop we were gathering. Like if we were gathering corn, they paid us in corn. We in turn would take that for the meal and the mealer would take his toll and we would have our bread, corn bread. And I remember helping harvest syrup cane and making syrup, and we got paid in syrup. And uh, things of that nature is about all I can remember. We lived so far back in the country that we didn't know we were poor really.

CM: Um. Did you have any type of transportation at that time?

WB: The only thing we had was horse and buggy.

CM: Horse and buggy.

WB: And no automobiles.

CM: Okay

WB: Most of the time, when we went from one place to the other we had to walk.

CM: Okay, you served, during the depression you joined the CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps. How did you get that job?

WB: First we had to have a certain poverty level to get on this WPA, which was the Works Project Administration, and then I had to be on that before I could make application to the Civilian Conservation Corps. And the, we worked, they furnished us our meals and our

clothing and a place to sleep, and we got \$5.00 a month and they sent \$25.00 home to mother. And that was in April the 20th of 1935.

CM: How long were you in the CCC?

WB: I was in from 1935 of April till September the 30th of 1936.

CM: Was there a camp or something that you had to go to?

WB: What?

CM: Was it a camp that you had to go to?

WB: Yes. My first assignment was at Molton, Alabama, which is kind of out from Decatur, and I was a laborer there, and that camp disbanded and we went to Danville 1/7/36, then I was transferred back to Ft. Payne in January '36 and I was at Ft. Payne until I was discharged September the 30th. And the reason for my being discharged, I did not request re-enrollment.

CM: What type of work was done at the CCC there?

WB: Well, the, uh, mainly built roads over in Molton and Danville. But when I came back to Ft. Payne we were involved in building the lodge building, the cabins, and all the buildings and things down at DeSoto State Park, the shelters and It says here I was a truck driver, which I was, the later part, but uh, I also helped put some of the rock that went into the building of the caretaker's home, and it's still there. And then I was involved in the transportation, I bought and serviced all the gasoline that serves the trucks and everything several months before I went out as a truck driver. And it says here that I was an excellent truck driver.

CM: (laugh)

WB: All my other work, I guess, was satisfactory and I got an honorable discharge. After leaving the CCC Camp I hitch-hiked to Detroit, Michigan in 1936 and there I went to work for the Fleetwood Fisher Body, which was the Cadillac Division of Fisher Body.

CM: What type work did you do there?

WB: I started out as just a common laborer, and they called it a trucker. I was placing the automobile body panels on the body truck. And they brought it into Calhoun finally, when it came out as a finished body. And in the time scheduling department, I was putting the painted automobile bodies into the drying oven, and I did that for a while as a painter, and for my later part that I was there I was a spray painter, I painted the bodies, anywhere from 12 to 14 Cadillacs a day.

CM: Humph. The TVA was one of the ? policies. Do you remember it and how it affected

your family, your community.

WB: I remember it well, but it did not affect any of our family because we was so far back, we didn't have, they didn't get the electricity over in that area for years and years. I don't know just exactly what year it was, but not in my time that I lived over there.

CM: Um, what was the, do you remember the feeling people had toward President Hoover?

WB: I can remember the feeling was not very well, but uh, I think the reason that he got elected was the man that run against him was ^{Al}Val Smith was a Catholic and people did not think that they wanted a Catholic for a President. And therefore, they elected Hoover. I think, best I can remember, times was pretty rough during Hoover days. But again, we were poor and everyone around us was poor.

CM: What was the feeling towards President Roosevelt?

WB: Well the feeling was great because he was the one actually that set up this work project administration and also the CCC and a lot of other things, and the feeling was very good. And I think if it hadn't been for the CCC I don't know what would have happened to my mother and my young brother and me. Because where they were furnishing something for me to eat and clothes and a place to sleep, the \$25.00 that went home to mother was a great help to her and my young brother.

CM: Um, President Roosevelt said, has been said that he helped the south a lot. Do you think he did?

WB: I know he did because, you just take DeSoto State Park for instance. The people that worked there, some of them went on to, developed a career there and went on and made a living doing the work that they were taught over there. And the State Park has been a benefit to DeKalb Co. and surrounding areas. Even today it's still a major part of the tourist attraction in this area. I might mention along there, if it might be of interest to you, in 1930 one, I helped build the dam, the second portion of the dam that exists up at DeSoto Falls.

CM: How, how was that done?

WB: Well it was, I pushed a wheel barrow, it was build by, well a carpenter made the forms, had a cement mixer, we'd haul the gravel and the sand and cement up and mix it and then roll it out and pour it in the form.

CM: Was that in the CCC?

WB: No that was before I went in the CCC.

CM: Um, How did Roosevelt's New Deal affect the south and the cultural programs?

WB: That I can't answer because we didn't farm, therefore, I'm sure it helped everybody

greatly in this area.

CM: Um, did you notice the industrial growth that happened during this time?

WB: I can't put my finger on specific things except probably the TVA Dam they built over at Guntersville, in the development of the Tennessee River.

CM: When you went to Detroit, was that still during the depression?

WB: 1936, I don't, yea I guess it was coming out of the depression. Uh, when I first went there was right after I got out of the CCC Camp and the depression was just beginning to lift, I guess, at that time.

CM: Was it worse out here than it was up there?

WB: Probably was, because I was making more money up there than I'd ever made in my life. And uh, things have changed an awful lot in the time period from then to now.

CM: Um, do you, uh, I don't know if you remember President Roosevelt, he had a house in Warm Springs, Georgia, he come to the springs to swim because he had polio. Do you remember anything about that?

WB: Only that I knew that that's where he went for his summer on the way from Washington. And I guess during the later part of his Presidency was when I was in the Navy. I went into the service in 1942? I got a discharged in 1945. 1943 was when I went in, I guess, the Navy.

CM: Um, Roosevelt won three times as President. Did you think that was too many times?

WB: Not at the time, Chris, everybody was willing for him to serve an extra, as many times as he possibly could because he had done so much for the south and everybody else as far as that was concerned. And, you know, he was the one that first created the Social Security Administration, that was in 1936, I think, my first social security, when I signed up for it was in '36 and they started in '37. And that has been one of his major accomplishments, I think, for us old folks.

CM: When Social Security first come into effect, did the people look at it as positive?

WB: I think most people did. As far as I know they did. I don't remember any negative feelings toward it.

CM: Um, lot of people said that Roosevelt used too much government, he had too much control, federal government.

WB: Well that may be true, but if he hadn't taken control I don't know what would have happened to the country, cause it sure was going down hill, sliding before he took over.

CM: Um, when the depression hit, it was kind of, it wasn't really sudden, but it was kind of sudden, it was a quick four years slide. Did you notice that it was, kind of like something that happened?

WB: Well, no not really because I was, like I was telling you before, we were so far back in the country that we didn't realize actually that there was a depression. We certainly didn't lose any money in it because we didn't have any money to lose.

CM: Um, you said earlier that you had to do odd jobs and stuff for money?

WB: Well not for money....

CM: For a living?

WB: For a living.

CM: Um, is that basically how you survived during the depression?

WB: Anything that we could do, like the post mistress at Mentone, I guess kind of helped me out as much as she could delivering special delivery letters and packages for the amount of extra postage, the cost of delivery specials delivery. I remember riding my bicycle from Mentone over to Cloudland, GA and delivering a package that I was paid 10 cents for. Actually it was 11 miles one way, 22 miles round trip for a dime, and I was glad to get the dime.

CM: Um, 1941 was when the war started for America, and Pearl Harbor. Can you tell me anything about that?

WB: I was working in Detroit at that time and I was working at Fleetwood Fisher Body. It was just a devastating thing to everybody. They, we had already started the 1942 production of automobiles, of course they just stopped making cars all together. The ones that was in production, we had to black out all the chrome and everything we painted black and they were the cars just for special people during the war, no civilian cars. I had been going to night school and was taking a course in tool-aid operation and I got a job at a little machine tool company for a while, and then I was called back into the die and machine unit. We was making the anti-aircraft gun housings for the five inch gun for the Navy, and that's where I was working until I was drafted.

CM: Um, during the World War I, was the war, was the war backed by Americans who were supportive.

WB: I'm sure it was, yes, it certainly was, by most Americans anyway. Cause after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, boy I mean it was something else.

CM: Um, on your background sheet you said you were involved in World War II, would you, what was your involvement in that?

WB: I was assigned to an aircraft ordinance repair unit and was sent to the South Pacific. And, our main objectives was to equip and supply Task Force 58 with airplanes for the re-taking of the Philippines. And I was stationed out in the Admiralty???? Islands which was about half way between New Britain and the Filipinos, and I was a diesel mechanic or a motor machinist, my rate was machinist made second class.

CM: Um, I've got one last question, um, the feelings between the North and South have always been kinda, kinda touchy, you know, people always looked at Northerners as Yankees, Southerners, I guess, I mean, Northerners look at Southerners kind of as dumb and slow, but uh, um, have you known the feelings to be stronger or to have changed as time goes by?

WB: I never did have and animosity toward Northern people, course like I say, when I went to Detroit they laughed at me for my funny accent, but they treated me good. I figured, I've always found that if you treat them right, they'll treat you right.

CM: Do you think there's any kind of difference in the way they live or...?

WB: Oh yea, they live at a faster pace up there, North, we kind of laid back, we go a little slower than they do up there. I remember we always around here, if we saw someone we'd speak to them no matter if we knew them or not, but up there if you say howdy and spoke to them, they looked at you and think "what are you doing speaking to me, I don't know you". But other than that everybody I worked with was especially kind. Course now I know there was instances where people didn't get along too well because of the way they lived going out of the South up there, but it wasn't too bad where I was.

CM: Um, just a quick note, during the depression were there a lot of the southerners leaving the South going North looking for jobs? Do you know anybody that did?

WB: Yes, I worked with people from, I know of several from Tennessee, there was quite a few left and went up there, but....

CM: Okay, that ought to do....

The New Deal, and the South

By

CHRIS McPHERSON

HY 442
Dr. Jackson
11:15-12:15 M,W,F
March 22, 1995

Franklin D. Roosevelt accepted the democratic nomination for president in 1932 promising a "new deal for the American people, a phrase that endured as a label for his administration and its domestic achievements. ¹There were many different efforts to end the Great Depression and reform the American economy in Roosevelt's New Deal. Most of which failed, but there were enough successes to establish it as an important episode of the twentieth century in the creation of the modern American state.

As I did my research for this paper, I could not find a full explanation of why the depression happened when it did. If depressions were always a possibility in the unregulated capitalist economy, why weren't there many great depressions in the years before World War II? ¹ Many people argued that the Great Depression was the consequence of an incredible and unlikely sequence of blunders in monetary policy. Most of the people controlling economic policy during the early 1930's followed the same gold-standard rules of conduct that had been followed the years before the depression. Why hadn't obedience to the rules of conduct led to similar blunders earlier?

At the height of the depression rational thinking began to look insane. Workers were out of work because firms would not hire them to work idle machines, firms would not hire workers because they saw no market for goods, and there was no market for goods because workers had no income to spend. In my interview with Mr. Woodrow Biddle, who grew up during the depression, he recalled how the depression had affected his family. ² "I remember having to work gathering crops and they didn't have money to pay us, so they paid us in the crops we had gathered. If we were gathering corn they paid us in corn,

Then we would take the corn to the mill and the miller would take his toll and we would have the rest for cornbread." He recalled.

³ From 1929 to 1932, incomes fell by nearly 44 percent in the South, Southerners made less than half of what Americans outside the South made, and industrial production in the South declined by half. Bankruptcy even threatened some southern governments. They only survived by making drastic cuts in their spending, paying their employees in scrip, which could be used to pay property taxes but nothing else, and by searching for new sources of revenue. These efforts led to general sales taxes, which hurt the people who were least able to pay.

² "We lived so far back in the woods we didn't know we were poor", explained Mr. Biddle. "We didn't know there was a depression, except what we had heard people say, We certainly didn't lose anything in it because we didn't have any money before the depression hit." Rural areas in the south didn't experience much change in economic distress during the depression because they had struggled through hard times all during the 1920's.

⁴ Franklin Roosevelt was not a southerner, but, as biographer Frank Freidel has wrote, he knew the south "uncommonly well, loved it, and aspired to bring it a richer, more noble future." Roosevelt had a second home in Georgia at Warm springs, where the mineral waters flowing at nearly 90 degrees helped him exercise his legs that were damaged by the effects of polio.

Roosevelt mingled on a friendly basis with the regions politicians and the people around Warm Springs, He developed nearby timber lands and demonstrated diversified agriculture and cattle breeding to neighboring farmers. Roosevelt often said his Georgia experience, had important effects on his thinking. High electric bills at Warm springs gave him ideas which led to the Tennessee Valley Authority. Poor schools and other problems in the area convinced him that the regions greatest challenge was poverty. In 1951 after a conference on regionalism, he talked informally about the South's needs for land planning, agricultural resettlement, factory-farm living, increased milk production, and other southern problems. (p.67)

The Great Depression transformed the political face of the South. The Economic disaster soon destroyed the political power of the Republicans. Democrats were the majority party, and southerners consequently rose to power and prominence. Many of which took important positions in Roosevelt's administration. However, the real power of the Democrats lay in congress, where seniority allowed them to chair most of the comities and to serve as floor leaders in both the House and the Senate. With this congressional power base the southern Democrats helped create and shape the New deal.

⁵ Southern influence was especially apparent in farm policy, Acreage limitations, price-support loans, marketing quotas, and soil conservation were all ideas that had grown out of the southern farmer movements. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation was set up largely at the insistence of congressman Henry Steagall of Alabama. Although, some southern Democrats opposed Roosevelt's New Deal for doing and spending too much, he enjoyed almost undivided support from his party.

Of the many creations of Roosevelt's New Deal, it was the Civil Conservation corps that most obviously had his personal backing. The CCC was aimed at one

of the most urgent problem facing the president in March 1933, the

hopelessness and despair of the American young people caught in the middle of the depression. ³ This problem was symbolized by the estimated 250,000 young people drifting about the country. Roosevelt had long been concerned over the waste of American natural resources that he had seen in the previous years. The depression gave him the opportunity to use another wasted resource, the nations unemployed young men, in order to do something about it. This resulted in the CCC. Authorized under the Civilian Conservation Corps Reforestation Relief Act of March 31, 1933, the CCC was expected to provide jobs for young men between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four who came from families already on relief. Thrown together in a hurry during the first weeks of the New Deal, it lasted until 1942 and was perhaps the most universally applauded of all the agencies created during the New Deal.

The idea of the CCC was very simple. Unemployed young men could volunteer to be placed in camps or companies of two hundred men and then be put to work restoring the national domain. Because of the need to get this program working quickly, it was decided to work through existing federal departments, with a CCC director to coordinate. The labor Department selected the CCC workers, the War Department transported them to camps, which it administrated, and the Agricultural and Interior departments supervised the conservation projects. ⁴ Each worker enlisted for an initial six-month period, renewable for up to two years, and they were paid \$30 monthly, \$25 of which was sent home to his family. Organized labor initially opposed the creation of the CCC, arguing that the pay scale of \$30 per month was too low and that administrative control of the U.S. Army would lead to regimentation and control of the work force. However, little opposition surfaced in congress, and the CCC would go on to be one of the most successful of New Deal programs.

² Mr. Biddle served in the CCC from April 1935 to September 1936. He was in camps at molton, danville and was finally transfered back to fort payne, Alabama. In molton and danville he helped build roads, and in fort payne he helped build cabins and lodges in what is now Desoto State Park. When I asked him what the CCC had done for him and his family he said: "If it weren't for the CCC I don't know what would have happened to my mother, my younger brother and me. While they were furnishing me a plate to stay and giving me something to eat, the \$25 that went home to my mother was a great help to them."

The CCC quickly caught the public imagination. Growing rapidly it had more than half a million young men, plus several thousand unemployed veterans of World War I in about 2,500 camps, at its peak in 1935. Its workers were engaged in a wide variety of conservation tasks, erosion control, wildlife protection, the development of national parks, the perservation and restoration of historical sites, and dam construction. Also, of all the trees planted in the U.S. up until 1972, 75 percent were planted by the CCC. ³ This earned the CCC the nickname of "Roosevelt's tree Army." Within the camps, the CCC also encouraged educational programs and some 35,000 men learned to read and write while in the corps. The CCC proved to be one of the most expensive New Deal agencies on a per capita basis. Nevertheless, most analyst agree that the projects completed during the agency's nine-year existence more than justified the expense.

Roosevelt tried to do three things at once, and the strategic issue was how to formulate and blend them. They were; unemployment or poverty relief, economic recovery, and economic and social reform. Relief is usually mentioned first among the three things New Deal goals because it was the most immediately urgent in a nation with one-quarter of the labor force unemployed, a nation living at half the material output of four years earlier.

Roosevelt decided that the federal government must give assistance to the destitute, not just the local government. However, relief was not the New Deal's primary objective in the long view of things. The primary objective was relief and reform together. He wanted a revived economy, which would shrink or eliminate the need for relief and restore health to the entire society.

¹ Most people feel that Roosevelt placed recovery a bit ahead of reform between 1933 and 1935, and then reversed his priorities from 1935 to the end of the New Deal, usually dated 1938. These patterns have been called the first(1933-35) and second (1935-38) New Deals. Some people have said that there was a third New Deal, in which FDR by 1937 had discovered and proposed the far-reaching governmental as well as economic reforms the New Deal required if it were to be fully realized. Thus the five year burst of change over which Franklin Roosevelt presided should be seen as a government pursuit of aid to the impoverished, a revived economy, a reformed political economy. Roosevelt's ranking of these, and his evolving sense of how they should be institutionalized gave the New Deals progressive pattern from the first to the third stage. But, These overall strategies in pursuing three goals were blurred in the legislative-administrative history of the New Deals, and many questioned their validity.

New Deal relief programs had mixed results. Many programs laid the foundation for a transformation of social work in the United States, But the programs did little to alter the established order of the South. Congress provided Roosevelt with the funds for the largest relief measures in American history. Most of these funds were grants to state and local governments, and many were required to match federal funds and that the administration of relief programs meet certain federal standards. This became a regular program with the Social Security Act of 1935. ³In addition to its most important program, benefits for the elderly and for dependent survivors of deceased workers covered by the program, the Social Security Act included aid to dependent children and the blind and provisions for public health, maternal, and child-welfare services.

The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed by Congress in 1938, set maximum hours and minimum wages and forbade child labor. The legislative battle that followed this act showed the growing dissatisfaction of many southern Democrats with the New Deal. Strong support had been giving to Roosevelt and his New Deal until 1936, and the South had benefited greatly from the new Deal. However, some of the southern Democrats got he idea that the Roosevelt and his New Deal was trying to convert the national Democratic party into the party of northern liberalism.

The New Deal had critics on the right and the left. In the 1930's and 40's, the conservative critics claimed that government intervention in the economy and society had gone too far, impairing the market mechanism, encouraging dependence upon

government among a formerly self-reliant people and concentrating too much power in Washington and the White House. However, most of these arguments have been rejected by historians.

The people loved Roosevelt and his New Deal policies, which was evident in his re-elections and his three terms. ² Mr. Biddle expressed his feelings for Roosevelt saying " The feeling toward him was great, he helped the south and the people were grateful, the CCC helped me and my mother and I felt that as long as he was president he would continue to help us."

¹In private, FDR mixed the satisfaction of achievement with disappointment that the New Deal system had not come closer to his intentions. Intending to lead the nation closer to the New Deal after the war, Roosevelt died in Georgia as spring pushed up the eastern seaboard. Roosevelt often said that errors could be eliminated by democratic people experimenting in the future. For half a century and more, this experimentation would take place within the framework laid down by the New Deal.

The South was greatly affected by the New Deal, Most of the programs helped the south and would ultimately change the face of the South. The CCC helped rebuild the forest lands of the South, created permanent jobs for many young men in the forestry area, and provided a source of income that was not previously there. Southern Politicians rose to prominence under the New Deal and Southerners finally played a big part in the National government. The New Deal brought hope and relief to a South that was suffering, and the southern people embraced it . If Mr. Biddle is a true example of the southern view of the New Deal those people who lived through the Depression will always look positive upon the New Deal.

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Historical Chronology

1920-1980

-The Great Depression

_ New Deal and its policies 1933- 1942

-The Solid South- and the cracks that occurred

- George Wallace and his three terms

- WW II

- End of jim crow laws

-Desegregation and the civil rights movement.

Gift and Release Agreement

We WOODROW W. BIDDLE and Chris McPherson
Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

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Fort Payne Alabama

on the date(s) of Feb 3, 1995

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Woodrow W. Biddle
Interviewee's signature

Address 2813 De Soto Parkway N.E.
Fort Payne, Al 35967
Phone 205-845-3129

Date 2-3-95

Chris McPherson
Interviewer's signature

Address 210 Greenleaf St Apt C-7
Jacksonville AL 36265
Phone 435-4233

Date 2-3-95

Interviewee Background Information

Name: WOODROW W. BIDDLE
Address: 2813 DE SOTO PARKWAY NE
Phone Number(s): 205-845-3139
Approximate age or date of birth: FEB. 22, 1916
Mother's name: BESSIE BIDDLE
Father's name: JOSEPH W. BIDDLE
Places lived and when: MENTONE, ALA. FROM BIRTH TO 1936 - DETROIT MICHIGAN - 1936 - 1946 - 2 YEARS SERVICE TIME DURING THIS TIME PERIOD FORT RANDOLPH, ALA. 1946 - TO PRESENT TIME
Education: HIGH SCHOOL GED PLUS 70 HRS COLLEGE CREDIT
Religion: UNITED METHODIST
Business, political and social memberships (past and present): _____

Present occupation: RETIRED
Former occupation(s): AUTO BODY PAINTER - FISHER BODY DETROIT, MICH. AUTO BODY REPAIR MAN - INSTRUCTOR IN AUTO BODY REPAIR
Special skills: PAINTER, AUTO BODY REPAIR
Major Accomplishments: _____

Local events in which you have participated: FISCHER RESCUE UNIT ABOUT 35 YEARS

State and/or regional events in which you have participated: _____

National events in which you have participated: WORLD WAR II

International events in which you have participated: _____

Natural born U.S. citizen? (Yes)/No
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: _____
Country from which you emigrated: _____
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in your possession: _____

Individuals you recommend who might be candidates for an oral history interview: _____

Additional information: _____

Woodrow W. Biddle

Tape Table Of Contents

- I. The great Depression and how it affected his family
- II. The New Deal
 - A. The Civilian Conservation Corps
 - B. How the programs were accepted
- III. Feelings toward President Hoover
- VI. Feelings toward president Roosevelt.
- V. How the New Deal affected the South and Mr. Biddle's family.

Prepared Questions for Interview

How did you get your job in the CCC?

How long were you in the CCC?

Where, ~~and~~ and what kind of work did you do in the CCC?

What were the affects of I.V.A. on your family and community?

What was the general feeling toward president Hoover during the Depression?

What was the feeling toward President Roosevelt, and his New Deal.

How did the New Deal affect the South? In Agricultural programs, industrial growth, etc...

~~How was the Federal anti-lynching Bill of 1941 Look upon?~~