

"THE TRAMP COMPANY alias THE DESERT RATS"

by Charles H. "Chuck" Davis

How many times did your company move?

Well, way out here in California we had a real moving company - and I was a member of that distinguished organization.

Company 912 holds the record for main camp moves, which were 18 in number during the 19 CCC periods. It would have been 19 but we had to stay at Camp San Juan Hot Springs for one extra period in order to get the swallows on track. More of this follows later.

Here is Company 912's track record:

CCC District Headquarters March Field, California Company 912 organized and activated (Major Henry H. "Hap" Arnold was the CO here).	5-12-33		
CCC Conditioning Camp March Field, California	5-13-33	to	6-4-33
CCC Camp Mammoth, F-100 Mammoth Lakes, California	6-5-33	to	10-31-33
CCC Camp Trabuco, P-226 El Toro, California	11-1-33	to	4-22-34
CCC Camp San Juan Hot Springs, P-228 San Juan Capistrano, California	4-23-34	to	5-29-35
CCC Camp Trabuco, F-366 El Toro, California	5-30-35	to	10-22-35
CCC Camp Temecula, F-163 Aguanga, California	10-23-35	to	5-14-36
CCC Camp Palomar Mountain, SP-16, Palomar Mountain, California	5-15-36	to	10-21-36
CCC Camp San Clemente Beach, SP-27, San Clemente, California	10-22-36	to	5-13-37
CCC Camp Wildrose, NM-5, Death Valley N M, Trona, California	5-14-37	to	10-2-37
CCC Camp Funeral Range, NM-1, Death Valley N M, Death Valley Junction, California	10-3-37	to	5-14-38
CCC Camp Wildrose, NM-5, Death Valley N M, Trona, California	5-15-38	to	10-6-38

CCC Camp Funeral Range, NM-1, Death Valley N M, Death Valley Junction, California	10-7-38	to	5-14-39
CCC Camp Wildrose, NM-5/NP-13, Death Valley N M, Trona, California	5-15-39	to	10-1-39
CCC Camp Funeral Range, NM-1/NP-11, Death Valley N M, Death Valley, California	10-2-39	to	5-14-40
CCC Camp Wildrose, NP-13, Death Valley N M, Trona, California	5-15-40	to	10-14-40
CCC Camp Funeral Range, NP-11, Death Valley N M, Death Valley, California	10-15-40	to	5-14-41
CCC Camp Wildrose, NP-13, Death Valley N M, Trona, California	5-15-41	to	11-3-41
CCC Camp Funeral Range, NP-11, Death Valley N M, Death Valley, California	11-4-41	to	6-30-42*

*On 6-30-42 Company 912 was deactivated and disbanded due to "Termination of the Civilian Conservation Corps". All enrollees still on rolls as of this date were Honorably Discharged - Termination of the CCC.

Company 912 was aptly nicknamed "The Tramp Company" and "The Desert Rats". Even though tramps, we were never bums, taking on some of the most difficult tasks in the CCC. A few of Company 912's tremendous, unbelievable accomplishments were:

(1) - At Camp Mammoth we spent four months and twenty-seven days drilling holes in solid granite and planting the earthquake seeds which are just now beginning to bear good sized, adult quakes. We also had a spike camp which spent its entire time dynamiting huge holes in the ground in order to form the numerous lakes now dotting the June and Mammoth Lakes areas.

(2) - We then moved on to Camp Trabuco where we poured out miles of concrete ribbon, two feet thick, in anticipation of the future need. This was such a monumental task that we had to make a return trip. When World War II started all the Marines had to do was roll out their runways and presto, the El Toro Marine Air Station.

(3) - Two different projects faced Company 912 while at Camp San Juan Hot Springs. The first one involved putting in a secret, underground pipeline from Bumpass Hell in Lassen Volcanic National Park to the San Juan Hot Springs, thus insuring a perpetual supply of hot, hot steam for the visitors to the springs. This project had to be accomplished clandestinely in as much as the Federal Government was not about to voluntarily give the state its hot steam.

The second, and more difficult task, required us to remain at Camp San Juan Hot Springs for an additional period. We devised a still top secret method of placing special "Aviarian Lanes" in our air space, invisible to humans but visible to the swallows. This is why the swallows always return to Capistrano - courtesy of Company 912.

(4) - Company 912's stay at Camp Temecula was devoted to a very special wildlife program. Our main project was to remove all of the wild goat herds from Billy Goat Mountain, make them think they were Tule Elk, by means of a special human to animal hypnosis method devised through the joint efforts of our psycho-neurotic Camp Surgeon and Educational Adviser, and then relocate them on Tule Peak, turning them loose to mingle with the Tule Elk herds. Why even today if one very quietly hikes up around Tule Peak you just may see a Tule Goat chasing a Billy Elk.

(5) - Camp Palomar Mountain was our next trip, where Company 912 accomplished the monumental task of slicing off the top of Palomar Mountain, leveling it, and then trekking down the mountain to the nearest railroad siding, where the Observatory was awaiting them. How to get it up on top of the mountain? Well, Company 912 had the answer. We filled 1 million balloons with hot air (CCC breath), hopped on the side of the observatory, and gently drifted to the mountain top. Once there we tactfully pin-pricked the balloons in accordance with a sequential plan and the observatory dropped right in place. This magnificent scientific edifice stands in place today, a monument to the creative genius of Company 912.

(6) - Our next stop was Camp San Clemente Beach. It was here that our sage Commanding Officer predicted the future election of Richard Milhous Nixon and put Company 912 to work on construction of "The Western White House". In order not to upset the balance of logical and reasonable presidential outcomes (all TV networks take note, you can learn a lesson from Company 912. All you have to do is build bigger outhouses to hide your predictions.), the entire structure was cleverly concealed by the placement of 100 extra large outhouses around the perimeter. These utilitarian structures were not removed until January 20, 1969, coincident with the inauguration of Richard M. Nixon as President of the United States. Chalk up another huge success for Company 912.

(7) - Company 912's next ten moves qualified it as the Desert Rat Company. Five moves to Camp Funeral Range and five moves to Camp Wildrose. Why all of this stupid back and forth movement in Death Valley. Well, it was all based on an agreement with Death Valley Scotty. It seems that he would not let the CCC in Death Valley unless they picked up all of the damned sand from Funeral Range (Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells resort areas) each spring and moved it to Wildrose Canyon where no one would disturb it.

Come fall - well move it all back to Funeral Range in time for the late fall and winter tourist season. Scotty used to personally supervise this project in order to be sure that not a single grain of sand was left behind during the moves. While the Sand Movement Crews were busy at work, two other main camp crews were also doing their thing. The "Cacti Placement Crew" and the "Desperation Sign Crew" were accomplishing their assigned tasks. All cacti, of various types and sizes had to be taken from storage and placed in visibility areas. Also, several hundred "BAD WATER", "NO WATER" and "NEXT GAS, WATER, AIR AND FOOD 50 MILES" signs had to be strategically placed where tourists were known to stray. Then, of course, we had our trusty Search and Rescue Team, which always seemed to know right where to go to rescue some poor, stranded tourists. Company 912 also set up two spike camps, one to drain all of the wells before the tourists arrived and another to place all of the skulls and bones in conspicuous places for the benefit of the tourists. Desert Rats - from the CO down we were just plain rats, and loving it!

But unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Our bubble burst on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor. We had just made our last move from Wildrose to Funeral Range and on December 8, 1941 started an entirely different project. The War Department came in, told Death Valley Scotty to get back in his Castle and shut up - that they were in charge now. We used to look up at the castle and see Scotty at a window, wiping away tears as we moved all of his precious sand over to the Desert Training Center so that General Patton's Armored Divisions could learn how to operate under desert conditions. Another great change took place in Company 912 during this period. All of our enrollees were enlisting in the 11th Mechanized Cavalry, so I went right along with them. When June 30, 1942 rolled around Company 912 was down to 35 members. My guess is that these 35 also took just one more transfer - to help win the war.

All kidding aside, this mobile and transient company distinguished itself in every facet of its assigned duties, at each camp to which assigned. Visitors to Mammoth Lakes, San Clemente Beach, Palomar Mountain, San Juan Capistrano and Death Valley National Monument owe much to the "Tramp Company" and "The Desert Rats" for playing such a significant role in the development of these tourist areas in our beautiful state of California.

And to the Tramps and Desert Rats - I told it just like it was - didn't I?

/s/
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