

Booth McGivaren

English 101-14

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Literacy Narrative

Urban(ite) Renewal

In the Spring of '01 I was living with my Mom, but squatting at my friends' apartment in the Old Port. Two of them paid rent there, but I just drank and smoked (every night). It had been two years since I graduated from high school, I had no job prospects, and was totally floundering. Basically, my only commitment was to my mother whom I promised to call if wasn't going to be home before two am. I could barely do that. I was starting to dislike the city, and I knew I needed to make a change. I remembered some hippie, "off the grid" types that I knew and figured I should just go live in the woods.

Through my Mom's career counseling job at the Department of Labor, that's exactly what I arranged to do. She knew of the Maine Conservation Corps and when she suggested that I talk to the director, I was at first reluctant. But she maintained that It would get me out of the city, earn me some money, and get me out of her hair. I wouldn't have admitted it then, but she had always been right about these types of things, so I went. But truthfully the only thing I was interested in was making money.

I arrived at orientation hung-over and under the impression I was going to be making a lot of money. But the director quickly informed me that I was now a volunteer, receiving a stipend, and on food stamps. Even though this information was in the literature they had sent me, it somehow came as a shock. Reality was setting in. I was in a three month commitment wherever they wanted and I was still going to be broke. Not to mention, I didn't know anyone there, what I'd be doing, or where I'd be doing it.

I was feeling very uncomfortable when two members of my crew approached to introduce themselves. Our Trail Crew Leader, Steve, said something like,

"You Booth? Welcome to the crew," and handed me a pin that said "bacon" on it. Zach, a tall sturdy looking fella asked,

"You smoke?" and I replied,

"Yeah, as much as possible." He told me that we would get along fine. We loaded a trailer full of tools that I had never seen before and attached it to a Suburban. Eight more people emerged and began telling me about the project we would be working on. A short time later we were en route to the Orono Bog.

We arrived at the job site mid-day, split into groups of twos and threes and immediately started working. One group built sections of boardwalk, another navigated them into the bog, while the others set them into place. We worked hard and were happy to do it. By the end of the first day, I felt comfortable with the tools, and the people I had just met were already becoming my friends. By the end of the first week, it felt normal. I wanted to give it my best.

As we became adjusted to living outdoors, our group got up with the sun and went down with the sun. Each morning began early with breakfast, calisthenics, and a

debriefing on the day to come. The morning commute from our campsite provided the perfect opportunity for our meetings. We worked between eight and ten hours a day, and rotated positions often throughout. By the end of the shift we all looked forward to cooking dinner and going to bed. Sleeping in a tent for eight days in a row was easy after the labor we put in. On the beginning of the ninth day we would journey back to our main office in Augusta, and go our separate ways for six days off.

In one month's time we had finished the Orono Boardwalk project and were setting off for another. I already noticed a change in me. I was eager to get up and start the day, I was stronger, and I was eating a healthier diet. My attitude towards work had done a complete one-eighty. I was pleased to work hard all day. Although I was still broke, I felt better than I had in years.

Our next job was on Mt. Desert Island, in Acadia National Park. One could not ask for a more beautiful office. One of our assignments was to build a section of trail that was ADA accessible (flat enough for a wheelchair to traverse). We did this in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and it was truly a work of art. We quarried and drilled stone, high-lined it down the mountain side, and set it into place. We had a lot of fun doing it, but for the most part took it very seriously. The work we did around the Jordan Pond Trail will be there for future generations to enjoy, and I can say that with pride.

About a month into the project the colors of Autumn started to show themselves. I have always considered Fall in New England to be my favorite time of year. But this was different. I felt a strong new connection to my surroundings. I enjoyed sitting quietly by myself and digesting the views from Acadia uninterrupted by the sounds of

cellphones, television, and cars. I felt like my mind had been opened and cleared. One night I saw the Aurora Borealis without any light pollution. I was suddenly finding zen creating a near perfect gradient in a trail's watershed. Had I still been in the city, I couldn't have experienced any of this.

Because of the MCC I know what it feels like to be part of a community. I essentially lived with the same ten people for three months, ten people that I would never have chosen. They were my family for that time. They taught me to how to appreciate nature again and the importance of its conservation. The work ethic they demonstrated in turn changed mine and their acceptance of me I will remember always. I'm not sure if any of them know how much they influenced my life but I do know I wouldn't trade my experiences with them for anything.

Today, I know the changes I felt as a result of working in the Conservation Corps, were merely a beginning (a turning point). I wish I could say that my time there cured the spiritual malady I've felt throughout my life, but it did not. I do know that nothing has ever affected me so strongly and that I still carry the principles I learned there. Whether or not I use them is up to me.

I look back at the lazy drunken boy from the city and see an entirely different person from the one who graduated from the MCC. One who would choose the country over the city any day of the week. One who takes initiative and revels in a job well done. One who isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Our service to the conservation of Maine's natural habitats earned us education awards. Awards that can be applied to tuition and student loans (very helpful these days). But nothing is more valuable to me than the experience itself. The motto of the Conservation Corps is, *Getting Things Done*, and I

can surely attest to the fact that they do. Whether it's constructing a boardwalk in a bog, building a trail in Acadia, or turning a floundering boy into an ethical young man, they are getting something done!