

BASS RIVER GAZETTE

A newsletter from the Bass River Community Library History Committee and the Great John Mathis Foundation
SPECIAL BASS RIVER STATE FOREST CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION EDITION

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BASS RIVER - NEW JERSEY'S FIRST STATE FOREST

by Kevin Wright

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Creation of New Jersey's Forest Park Reservations

Following the Legislature's instructions, the State Geological Survey employed Gifford Pinchot in May 1894 to conduct a botanical survey of New Jersey's forests. In response to Pinchot's study of the devastating consequences of forest fires in South Jersey, the State Geologist recommended in 1898 the creation of a State Forest Fire Service and the acquisition of State Forest Parks to protect the supply of potable water.

In May 1901, the Geological Survey proposed a great scheme to preserve and protect a vast forest range in New Jersey through a system of State Forest Reservations, similar to those in Germany. They recommended the employment of an expert forester to make an annual estimate of the loss and damages caused by forest fires.

With the lumber industry at low ebb, due to the inferior quality of standing timber across the State, Governor Edward Casper Stokes recognized the value of state forests in protecting water-sheds and for use as game preserves, pleasure parks, camping grounds and picturesque retreats. He recommended the purchase of forest reserves in his inaugural address of January 17, 1905. This was the turning point for State forests in New Jersey.

As a result of the Governor's advocacy, a bill for the appointment of a State Board of Forest Park Reservation Commissioners was enacted on March 22, 1905 creating the Forest Park Reservations. It entrusted the care, management and preservation of forest parks to a five-member State Board of Forest Park Reservation Commissioners. They were to "observe, keep in view, and, so far as it can, put in operation the best method to reforest cut-over and denuded lands, to forest waste and other lands, to prevent injury of forests by fire, the administering and care of forests on forestry principles, the encouragement of private owners in preserving and growing timber for commercial and manufacturing purposes, and the general conservation of forest tracts around the headwaters and on the water-sheds of all the water courses of the state ..." They adopted the Salem Oak as the State Forest emblem at their first meeting on June 27, 1905.

The First Forest Parks

On October 4, 1905, the first step was taken toward putting the new forestry preserve plan in operation, with the acquisition of 970.59 acres of woodland: (1) 373.59 acres of recently burned woodland about one and a half miles south of Mays Landing in Weymouth Township, Atlantic County, and (2) **597 acres in Bass River Township, Burlington County**. These tracts were "to demonstrate the best methods of refreshing cut-over and denuded lands; of showing how to prevent injury by forest fires, and the general administering and care of woodlands in a way to make them self-creating and self-sustaining." According to the New York Times, "the movement is regarded as of much importance in New Jersey, where forest fires and want of skill in care and cutting are fast wiping out the forests."

The Bass River Reserve

The Forest Park Commission accepted Charles W. Mathis' offer



An early Bass River State Forest white pine plantation after pruning. Many of the trees grown in the State Forest can be found throughout New Gretna, as seedlings from these plantations found their way into many local yards. (Photo from the Forest Resource Education Center, NJ Forest Service archives.)

to sell 597 acres in Bass River Township, Burlington County. At \$150 per acre, this land had little value, but, as was duly noted, "It is such land as this, however, that the State should acquire and develop. The Commission believes that it can be made a profitable investment, and perhaps make the nucleus of a large reservation."

The State of New Jersey added 1,100 acres to the Bass River Forest Reserve in June 1906, purchasing several tracts from W. W. Pharo, of Philadelphia, including 400 acres of swamp and upland, located on the East and West Branches of Bass River; 254 acres of swamp and upland bordering the Falkinburg Branch, the Townings Branch and the Main East Branch of Bass River, for \$1,350; and 189 acres of upland, located one and a half miles to the west, for \$500. The Board also purchased a dwelling house on 9.5 acres, known locally as the old French farm, situated along the east side of the Bass River, from W. C. Irons, of New Gretna, for \$325, together with 180 acres of cedar swamp and woodland on the Merrygold Branch of the Wading River for \$405.

On December 3, 1906, Samuel Budd Allen was employed as caretaker and warden of the Bass River Forest Reserve for \$35 per month. The old French farm had been acquired for a reserve headquarters and residence for the forest warden, but Warden Samuel Budd Allen preferred to reside at his home in New Gretna. Between November 1, 1906, and November 1, 1907, another 1,043 acres (including buildings) were added to the Bass River Reserve, bringing its total area to 1,633 acres. By 1908, upwards of seven miles of fire lines, varying in width from 8 to 30 feet, were constructed.



The Bass River Forest Reserve originally con-
(Cont. page 2)

Samuel Budd Allen chose to live with his family in their North Maple Avenue home in New Gretna rather than accept housing on State Forest land. 1- Sam; 2- Lida Mae, wife; 3- Everett; 4- Elizabeth; 5- Ada; 6- Grove; 7- Ida; and 8- baby Margaret. (Photo courtesy of Jean Allen Lainhart, Samuel's granddaughter.)

BASS RIVER - NEW JERSEY'S FIRST STATE FOREST

(Continued from page 1)

sisted of young pitch pine, oak sprouts, cedar swamp, and scrub oak; all of which, with the exception of some of the swamp, had been badly burned over at various times in the past. It was acquired with the intention of demonstrating "the possibility of maintaining commercial forests on our poorest sands, and the means by which that end is to be attained."

Work began on the Bass River Reserve in April 1907 with the establishment of a small nursery, containing eighteen beds each 4 by 20 feet, occupying about one-sixteenth of an acre, enclosed by wire fence. By September 1907, the nursery contained 24,300 seedlings of Jack Pine, Western Yellow Pine, Scotch Pine and Locust. The Western Yellow Pine failed, while the Jack Pine prospered. A new nursery was established in another part of the Bass River Reserve in the spring of 1908, consisting of thirty-six beds, each 4 by 24 feet, on a tract of loamy sand. After one year, the nursery beds nourished 15,000 Loblolly Pine, 2,000 Scotch Pine and 900 Douglas Fir. Attempts at broadcasting the seed of Loblolly Pine on ten sample plots proved disappointing.



One of the early nurseries at Bass River State Forest. Thousands of seedlings were grown and transplanted throughout the area. (Photo from the Forest Resource Education Center, NJ Forest Service archives.)

On February 8, 1908, the Forest Park Reserve Commissioners authorized Professor John B. Smith, the State Entomologist, to cut white oak sprouts on the Bass River Reserve as part of a "necessary experiment" in silkworm culture.

In his report for 1914, State Forester Alfred Gaskill described the Bass River Forest Reserve as follows:

Bass River Reserve

1,633 Acres. Warden, S. B. Allen; P. O. New Gretna.

This reserve, six miles from Tuckerton, and only two miles from the shore boulevard at New Gretna, is typical of what is commonly known as the Pine Barrens. It is also demonstrating the value of South Jersey soils for the production of pine, oak, and cedar timber with no other help than the control of fires, from which it has been immune since it came into the possession of the State in 1906. A small quantity of timber is now salable and probably will be utilized during the coming winter. A number of experimental plantations are yielding valuable data.

Early in the fall a proposition was made to divert the traffic on the shore boulevard over a road through the reserve while the bridge across Bass River was under construction. A perfectly amicable arrangement was made with the County Freeholders by which the road has been reconstructed and is being maintained in such a way that the risk of fire is minimized.

A private one-mile extension to furnish telephone service to Bass River State Forest was completed in 1921 and a small forest nursery for loblolly pine was started in the spring of 1922. The old house on the French Farm in Bass River State Forest, previously leased, was renovated in 1922 to make a suitable residence for the forest ranger

and a helper.

A prolonged drought, commencing in the latter half of June 1921, triggered an exceptionally destructive season of forest fires. A fire that extended over nearly 35,000 acres burned 400 acres of young timber in Bass River State Forest. Another forest fire swept 200 acres of oak and pine at Bass River in April and May 1922.

Recreational development began with the creation of the State Park Service in 1923. A considerable amount of maintenance equipment, including wagons, plows, shovels, spray tanks and other tools were purchased, and a picnic ground was built at Bass River.



The first fire tower in Bass River State Forest was located on East Greenbush Road next to the old French Farm house. (Photo from the Forest Resource Education Center, NJ Forest Service archives.)

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

From 1932 to 1941, twenty-two Civilian Conservation Corps camps in New Jersey engaged in making improvements in seven State Parks and eight State Forests, covering 51,374 acres. Specifically, the CCC operated seven camps within five State Forests, as well as camps within two State Parks. Several other CCC camps were shared jointly by the State Parks and other public agencies. The program spent 226,897 man-days on State Forest work alone in 1939. At that time, the average annual cost of operating a camp, including materials purchased for work projects, amounted to \$180,000. In 1941, its final season, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided 178,193 man days of enrolled labor to the State Forest properties, consisting of 168,167 man days on the State Forests and 10,026 man days for the Forest Fire Service on fire control projects on private lands. By that time, camps were not operating at fully authorized enrollment due to the shortage of enrollees.

The CCC enrolled unmarried and unemployed citizens, 17 to 24 years of age, in six-month programs and up to two years of job training. Enrollments were received in April and October, allowing farm boys to sign up for the winter months and return home for spring planting. Workers earned approximately \$30 per month. After camps had their full quota, several hundred additional enrollees were sent to the Ninth Corps area in the far West, to New York State and to Delaware.

Enrollees engaged in erosion control, nursery work and reforestation. They constructed park roads, trails, bridle paths, vehicular bridges, ponds for fish and waterfowl, lookout towers, observatory shelters, picnic, fireplaces, campgrounds, recreational lakes, and landscaping.

The Civilian Conservation Corps continued to operate seven camps on five State Forests in 1939, spending 226,897 man-days on forest work and park improvements. The average annual operating cost per camp, including materials purchased for work projects, amounted to \$180,000.

The Civilian Conservation Corps terminated its activities on June 30, 1942.

CCC Accomplishments at Bass River State Forest

Workers from the CCC Camp S-55, Company 225, at Bass River, constructed a new recreational area, including construction of an 800-

(Continued on page 3)

BASS RIVER - NEW JERSEY'S FIRST STATE FOREST

(Continued from page 2)

foot earthen dam with clay core and concrete spillway for a new 67-acre Lake Absegami with sand bathing beach and diving platform at Bass River between 1939 and 1941. Construction of a contact station, latrines, five camp shelters, three overnight cabins, began in 1940. Six cabins with fireplaces were built alongside the lake. Managed intensively under forestry principles, Bass River offered many forestry demonstrations to visitors and township residents.

Shortly after the Civilian Conservation Corps was terminated in June, 1942, a unit of the 731st Military Police Battalion occupied the CCC Camp at Bass River until February 1, 1944.



Dam with
concrete spillway

(The preceding article is an edited and condensed version previously published by the State of New Jersey. We thank the author, Kevin Wright, for allowing us to adapt it and add photos for this newsletter.)

BASS RIVER CCC CAMP, COMPANY 225, CAMP S 55 - May, 1935



Photo of the officers and men at the Bass River CCC Camp, Company 225, Camp S-55, shows the headquarters building on the right with the barracks buildings in the background. Horace Somes, Sr., a forester, later from Wading River, is seated in the front row, 10th from the right. (Photo courtesy of Horace Somes, Jr.)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR - THE BASS RIVER CCC CAMP

6 January 2005

I read Almira Steele's story about the CCC camp in New Gretna [Gazette Issue #16] with interest. I visited there myself in 1942 with the Tuckerton Boy Scout Troop. A large group of us, under the direction of our Scoutmaster Howard Smith, hiked along the then gravel Stage Road to the Camp near the East Greenbush Road. The camp was then inhabited by Veterans of World War I, and they had invited us to dinner. They showed us around the camp and then we all sat down to a meal of hot dogs cooked in baked beans. I thought this was unusual and made an excellent meal. When I got home to Tuckerton I described it to my mother who decided it was an easy dinner to prepare and added it to her dinner menus. My brother and I glommed it down with gusto and frequently fought over the leftovers in the fridge at night. I had a plate full of this mix pushed in my face more than once, but still like the dish.

We learned that the CCC's had built Lake Absegami and its beach and bath-house and then later rode our bikes up the stage road to swim there. It was free in those days and it had a beach. Tuckerton



The dam, completed in 1941 by the CCC, restricted the water flow of the West Branch of the Bass River, creating Lake Absegami. (Photo courtesy of Bass River State Forest photo archives.)

Lake had no beach then, and we swam there by the mill dam, but it seemed more adventuresome to ride to Absegami. I don't know how Howard Smith got the invitation to take us to dinner at the CCC camp, but that was just one of the many opportunities he provided for us boys. We spent a great deal of time in his basement and learned a great deal which we often forget where we learned. I never understood how he and his wife Mamie stood us.

Murray T. Harris

January 2005

I was very much impressed with the amount of information which you collected for the article on the Bass River CCC Camp in the January-June 2004 issue of the Gazette.

I was too young to have much awareness of the existence of the Camp when the CCC young men were there, except to know that my uncle, Walter Mathis, worked there during the day doing plumbing and came home to New Gretna at night. However, when the World War I veterans were in residence, we got to know some of them personally. Mr. Wille, who played the violin, and Mr. Morris, who had a beautiful bass voice, would come to our house occasionally for a musical evening. My mother, Minnie Mathis Shropshire, would play the piano and, more importantly from our point of view, make a lemon meringue or chocolate cream pie.

Later, when sugar became scarce, I went with a group up to the Camp to register the men for sugar rationing. We were invited to stay for lunch — we also had baked beans and hot dogs.

Jean Shropshire Harris

HAPPY 100th YEAR CELEBRATION !

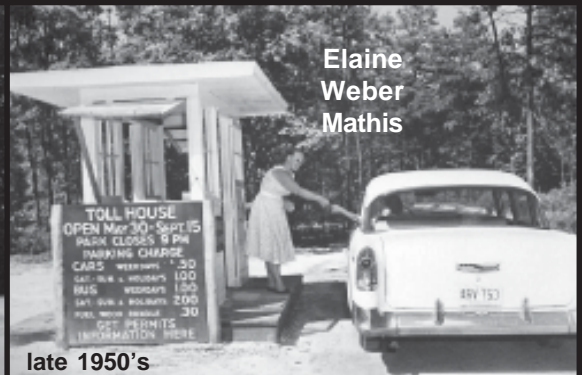
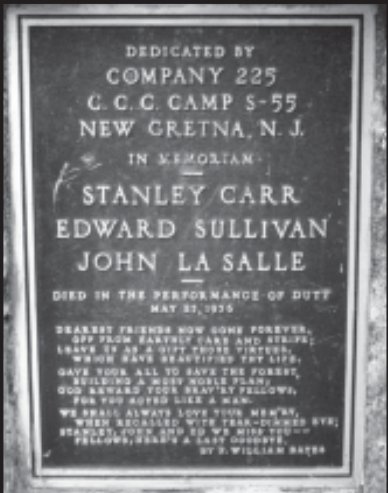


Horace
Somes



c 1938

New Gretna
girls



Elaine
Weber
Mathis

late 1950's

SOME BASS RIVER STATE FOREST SUPERINTENDENTS



Samuel Budd Allen (1861-1946) from New Gretna was the first caretaker and warden at Bass River State Forest. (Photo courtesy of Jean Allen Lainhart, Samuel's granddaughter.)



Jim MacDonald (1906-1974) was Superintendent for many years and is fondly remembered by many people in the area today. (Photo courtesy of the Bass River State Forest archives.)



Cynthia L. Coritz is the current Superintendent, carrying on the tradition of maintaining Forest services and encouraging community involvement in Forest activities.

The Bass River CCC Camp

(Continued from page 6)



Owen and Helen Sears Carty in 1941. Owen came to the Bass River CCC camp from Pleasantville, N.J. and settled in the New Gretna area with his local bride. He became an asset to the community as did other CCC men who chose to stay in the area with their local brides. (Photo courtesy of Helen Sears Carty.)

Allen. They moved to Lakewood, N.J., Raymond's home town. **Ed Greene married Helen Mathis** who lived with her parents, Daniel and Mary Patterson Mathis, on the east corner of Amasas Landing Road and Route 9 where the Becker family now lives.

Ambrose Pitts married Leila Mathis. They had two daughters, Jean and Barbara, and made their home in Arkansas and, later, Memphis, Tenn. Leila frequently visited her parents, Clarence and Helen Gerew Mathis, family, and friends. We were always happy to see her when she came back home. **Sheldon Campbell married Charlotte Cramer**, daughter of Gid and Mabel Jones Cramer who lived in the Squab Hill section of North Maple Avenue in the present residence of the Sellner family. **Jim MacDonald married Julia Archer.** They had one son, James, Jr., and made their home in Tuckerton for a while.

Horace Somes married Mary Cramer. Sadly, Mary was killed in an automobile accident soon after their marriage. **Horace later married Dorothea McAnney from Wading River.** They had two sons, Horace and Frank who still live in Wading River with their families. They continue the family tradition of operating the Wading River Christmas Tree Farm on Turtle Creek Road.

Some of the local men who joined the Civilian Conservation Corps were Bud Allen, Harry Allen and his sons Ben and Leon, Bob Adams, Elton Carr, Renard Wiseman, Tom Watson of pistol shooting fame, Gene Sears, Lou Hedeveary, and Ralph Loveland. Most of them lived at home and reported for work at the CCC camp each week day. Ben Allen says that the dollar a day that they earned helped the family through some pretty rough times.

Eventually, with the start of WW II, the economy improved, jobs were opening up, and the men were able to find work and support their families. The CCC camps were no longer needed and became a part of history. The Bass River CCC barracks were then used to house World War I Veterans who had no place to live. That lasted until the WW I vets dwindled down to a precious few, and then the camp closed for good. Today, all the buildings of the CCC camp west of East Greenbush Road have been torn down, and the site is just a memory of days gone by. Only a stone monument remains, just a stone's throw from the CCC camp barracks site, honoring the men of the CCC and their work in the area and reminding us of the camp's existence.

We have thousands of visitors every year going to Lake Absegami with its sandy beach surrounded by cabins, shelters, and campsites.



The CCC memorial at the upper end of East Greenbush Road has a series of plaques and an adjacent photo display recognizing the achievements of the Bass River CCC camp. One of the bronze plaques on display is a memorial to CCC men Stanley Carr, Edward Sullivan, and John LaSalle who lost their lives, on 5/25/1936, fighting a forest fire in the area. (7/22/04 photo)

I believe credit for this valuable recreational facility is due, in part, to the men of the Civilian Conservation Corps who took the first steps in the beautification of a very rewarding project which is now the well maintained and well protected Bass River State Forest.

This story is reprinted from the January-June, 2004 (Issue #16) edition of the Bass River Gazette.

The Bass River CCC Camp an original poem by Almira Cramer Steele

The CCC Camps were a project
Created to help those who had lost
So much of their life-long savings
That the Great Depression had cost.

Bass River was one site selected
Because the potential was there
To provide all the space that was needed
For the men and the work they would share.

The barracks were built rather quickly
By some of our local men,
Overlooking the Fir Bridge section
Where the head of Bass River begins.

The camp men worked in the forest
Cutting brush, building bridges, making roads,
While disturbing many woodland creatures
Like snakes and turtles and toads.

Their efforts were the very beginning,
As they worked from day light till dark
Preparing a way in the making
For our beautiful Bass River State Park.

October, 2005

Gazette Subscriptions

A yearly subscription (2 issues) of the Gazette is available for anyone who sends 2 business size, 4" x 9 1/2", stamped, self addressed envelopes to Gazette Subscriptions c/o Bass River Township Community Library, P.O. Box 256, New Gretna, NJ 08224. There is no charge for the subscription; however, donations are appreciated. The subscription will start with the next issue unless otherwise specified and will expire after the 2 envelopes are used. It may then be renewed by sending 2 or more additional envelopes. Don't fret if your copy is a month or two late. We seem to always be busy on some history project and can't seem to get to the Gazette in a timely fashion.

ANOTHER THING I REMEMBER

by Almira Cramer Steele

The Bass River CCC Camp

After the great depression in 1929 when the banks closed their doors causing many people to lose their life savings was a very hard time for an awful lot of families. People were standing in bread lines in order to get something to eat, especially in the cities. Living around here, in the Bass River area, was a little bit different, however, as far as food was concerned. There was always plenty of seafood available, like fish, clams, oysters, crabs, eels, mussels, and scallops.

In the summer every family had a little vegetable garden which provided fresh vegetables all summer long and canned vegetables for the winter months as well. It was not uncommon to see a chicken pen in the back yards where eggs were gathered and chickens were waiting to supply the families with a good Sunday dinner. During hunting season, game was brought home by the hunters such as duck, pheasant, quail, rabbit and deer. So, really, we were well supplied with a variety of things to eat, but very little else.

When Franklin Roosevelt became President in the 1930's, one of the many programs he started to assist people during the Depression was the Civilian Conservation Corp, also known as the CCC. It was a work program for those who needed help and were willing to work for it. These camps were scattered throughout the United States, and Bass River was one of the locations chosen for the project. The Bass River camp was situated at the head of the Bass River in the Fir Bridge section of town, just off East Greenbush Road. There were also nearby camps in Port Republic and Green Bank.

Food, lodging, and clothing were provided for everyone in the program plus wages of \$1.00 a day. Lots of times there was more than one family member in the program and most of those wages were sent back home to help their families survive.

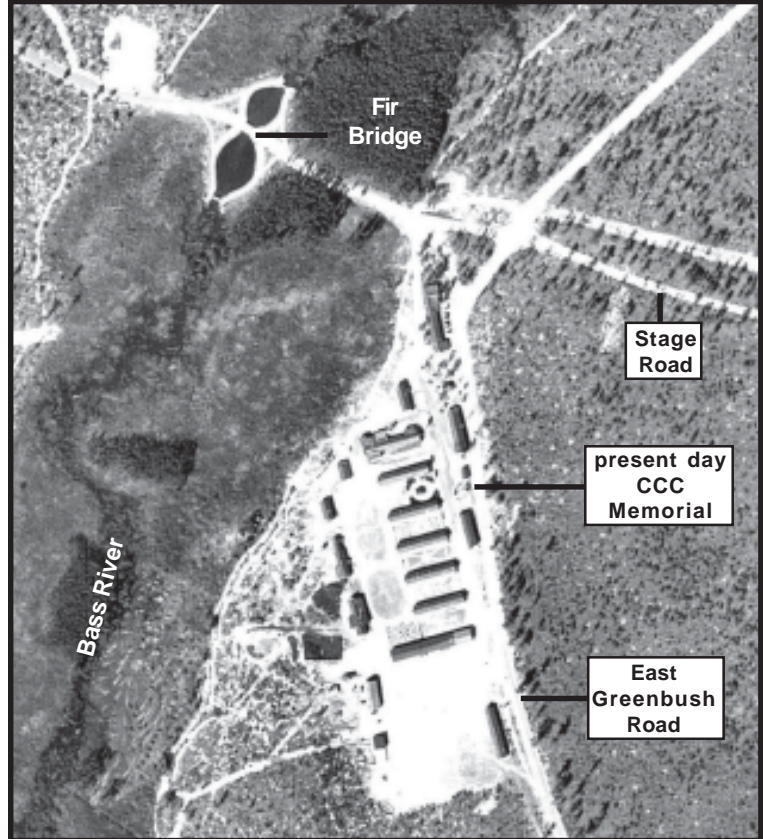
Many of Bass River's local citizens touched the lives of those in the CCC camp. Ben Broome and Russell Adams who owned and operated a sawmill in town prepared the lumber and built several of the buildings used by the CCC in the Bass River camp. Mrs. Rebecca Mathis, who lived not far from the camp, was often asked by the men to alter some of the donated clothing so that the clothes would fit a little better. She always accommodated them, and on payday, they showed their appreciation.



Miss Margaret who taught school at Bass River for 40 years helped many of the CCC men with their reading skills. (Photo courtesy of Naomi Maurer.)

Unfortunately, there were a few of the men in the CCC Camp that had very little education. Miss Margaret Adams who was my primary, first and second grade teacher volunteered her services a couple of evenings each week in order to teach those who needed help to learn to read and write. I am sure there were other local people who also shared their time and talent in different ways, helping those young men to feel at home away from home in whatever way they could.

The jobs of the CCC Camp employees were mostly developing and protecting the forest. They built and repaired roads, cut brush, planted trees, fought forest fires, and helped build a ball field and small addition at our local school. They did whatever needed to be done to improve the surrounding forest. Officers were appointed to oversee the work and the workers. I believe that this work program was the



A 1940 aerial photo of the Bass River CCC camp shows the location of the barracks and other buildings in relation to Fir Bridge and Stage & East Greenbush roads. (Photo courtesy of NJDEP, Bureau of Tidelands Management.)

beginning of what is now our beautiful Bass River State Forest as it exists today.

Even though the CCC camp men worked hard, they also had time to relax. Entertainment was provided for all those who wanted to take advantage of it. Pool tables and card tables were set up where the men could compete in the game of their choice. Movies were shown several times a week and, on special occasions, a band was scheduled for an evening of fun. Several of the locals joined in on these events and had a great time. The camp also published a camp newsletter called "Mosquito Bites" which is available in the New Jersey History section of our Bass River Community Library.

Once in a while there was a little excitement in the ranks to make things a little more interesting, I guess. Lights out in the barracks was at 10 PM. Tom Watson, a Bass River resident who worked and slept at the CCC Camp, was a pretty good shot with a revolver. He had worked very hard that day and had gone to bed just before 10 PM. Ten o'clock came and went and the lights were still on. He called three times for the lights to be turned out, but no one answered his call. Tom calmly took out his pistol and shot out every light bulb in the building. That took care of that! I hope everyone got a good night's sleep after all that commotion.



Tom Watson who worked for a time at the Bass River CCC camp sits with his granddaughter Marge. Tom was a crack shot with a pistol. (Photo courtesy of Bob & Marge Sutton.)