Oldtimers remember park's construction during Depression

By NANCY REGENT

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LAFAYETTE — It is difficult to picture: Girard Park without the lake, lush vegetation and colorful playground equipment. But more than half a century ago it was only a briar patch in the woods, located near a small college in a town whose population was 39,000.

A handful of men recently recalled developing the park where they were stationed from 1933-1942 in the Civilian Conservation Corps. Their memories are vivid, and they swap stories and laugh over the details of their teen-age days in the work program.

In a few weeks, renovations to the park will be complete. A ceremony commemorating the CCC program at Girard Park is set for June 27.

The city paid about $1.3 million to renovate its flagship park, which has 33 acres of picnic tables, playgrounds, a baseball field, running and walking tracks and tennis courts. The park is the location of the city's Parks and Recreation Department, which oversees 28 parks in Lafayette.

Mounds of dirt are piled around the lake and at various points in the park, denoting renovations that have been ongoing since December. The city deepened the lake from 5 to 10 feet, enabling better water quality and bigger stocks of fish.

The dirt is being used to fill in ditches, giving the park about three more acres of usable grounds.

“I remember over there, where that dirt is, there were about three barracks set up,” Daniel Roddy, 74, says as he points to the northwest area of the park, where the playground is located. “They drilled us just like soldiers. We did calisthenics right here.”

Roddy was 19 when he joined the corps, grateful for the $45 a month in pay he received. He says the corps gave $10 of that to him, sending the rest to his parents.

The men are from rural areas throughout Acadiana, from families that were poverty-stricken during the Depression.

The CCC was established as a New Deal agency under President Franklin D. Roosevelt for young men who were unemployed. The corps worked on conservation projects, such as taking care of drainage work on farmers' coulees in southwestern Louisiana. More than 2 million men served in the CCC before Congress abolished it in 1942.

The monument in the park is a tribute to the 250 young men who were in the Lafayette corps, known as Company 4403. Some of the members of the company built the monument, which resembles a medieval castle. The names of all company members are buried in a glass jar, underneath the structure.

“The corps sure made a man out of you. You can all vouch for that,” says Mervine Hernandez, 73. He was 17 when he joined the corps, working on a surveying crew for 11 months before taking another CCC position guarding the motor pool at night.

In addition to their assignments, the men helped clean up the park area, where they cleared the woods, dug ditches and created roadways for the corps machinery. Hernandez remembers picking muscadines in one area of the park.

“When you’re young, you don’t mind working hard like we did,” he says. “Most of us were drafted right after the corps, and believe me we were ready.”

The men walked slowly to the monument, which was recently restored. During the days when they were stationed in the park, the monument was a bulletin board, where headlines about Nazi Germany and pre-war activity were the dominating focus.

One member of the corps alumni group said he didn’t like the monument being restored. “It filled in a hole that ducks used for roosting,” he said. But Gerald Boudreaux, Parks and Recreation director, says the ducks were a problem. The renovations should help direct the ducks to certain areas, and newly planted vegetation should keep the ducks out of areas around the lake where erosion was occurring.

The park sports other kinds of dancing these days, when Festivals Acadiens draws thousands of people to the outdoor stages in the fall.