



The Legends Of YMCA Camping

The Perspective Guest:

Camping In America: Proud Tradition, Lasting Impact

By Peter Surgenor

“The summer camp, as we know it, ... developed in the United States. Outdoor living by young people in small groups within larger camp communities, isolated from city distractions, dedicated to free and joyous experiences with educational values, with leaders especially selected for their understanding and guidance skills: This is the American concept of camping.” That is how Reynold E. Carlson, president of the American Camp Association (ACA) during 1949 and 1950, put it.

Indeed, since its inception in the mid 1800s, the camp industry has harnessed

that indelible American spirit and woven itself into the very fiber of our society, taking wisdom from historical lessons and innovative thinking and creating programs that have made history themselves.

The perceived need for camp as an organized practice grew out of the trend of families leaving farming life in the country in favor of an urban existence in the cities that grew at record pace in the 1800s. Along with this



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new urban sprawl came a sense among a number of forward thinkers that removal from the natural world for an extended

‘THERE WERE LIKELY MORE THAN 100 YMCA CAMPS AND AS MANY PRIVATELY OWNED CAMPS BY 1902.’

period of time held inherent dangers, the “tyranny of the cities,” Winthrop T. Talbot, an early camp leader, called it.

Even without today’s distractions of television, video games, cell phones, and computers, Talbot noted that “the city

boy is afraid of what seems to him silence — silence, because his ear is too ill-trained to hear the music of the soil and dwellers; he talks much, objects, argues, discusses — a sign of nervous instability and long-continued strain; [at camp] gradually he grows into harmony with the calm about him, and cheerful good nature replaces ill-temper ...”

The title of “first camp”

is a subject that may be open to some debate because, as it happened, the birth of organized camp seemed somewhat like a case of spontaneous combustion. Camp experiences spurred by individuals cropped up simultaneously, with the Northeast appearing to be the epicenter of camp activity.

THE PIONEERS

“The pioneers of organized camping were men and women with a vision of the impact of outdoor living experiences on the lives of boys and girls,” wrote Eleanor Eels, author of *History of Organized Camping: The First 100 Years*. “These forward thinking and acting camp directors entered into similar ventures, unaware that the seed of this movement was also germinating in the minds and efforts of others nearby.”

However, William Gunn most often is credited as being “the father of organized camping,” having instituted a camp program affiliated with his Washington, Connecticut-based Gunnery School in the summer of 1861. The program included many of the trappings we associate with the modern camp experience — swimming, fishing, games, and songs sung and stories told by the flickering light of a nighttime campfire.

A HEALTHY ATMOSPHERE

Dr. Joseph Trimble Rothrock founded what is considered to be the first private camp in 1876 near Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Called the North Mountain School of Physical Culture, this four-month-long summer camp was intended to provide a healthy atmosphere for “weakly” boys while offering practical survival knowledge in the woods.

Camp Chocorua, though it operated for only eight years beginning in the early 1880s, was another camp with a strong influence over future camp leaders that would eventually solidify the organized camp movement. According to the camp’s Dartmouth student founder, Ernest Balch, Chocorua existed for “the development of a sense of responsibility

in the boy, both for himself and others, and appreciation of the worthiness of work.”

The YMCA and its collective branches up and down the Eastern seaboard jumped on the organized camp bandwagon early, providing camping trips for their young adult members as early as the 1860s. Official YMCA records began tracking camp programs

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under their outings and excursions departments in 1881. But Camp Dudley is the Y’s organized camp claim to fame. It is known today as the first and oldest continuously operated camp in the United States.

Henry H. Gibson, author of the 1936 book *History of Camping*, provided this description of Camp Dudley’s fledgling season: “Early in the summer of 1885, Sumner F. Dudley, a young businessman ... and summer resident of East Orange, New Jersey, borrowed a tent, hired a boat, and gathered seven congenial Newburgh, New York, boys who were members of the YMCA for a camping trip to Pine Point of Lake Orange.

“To this meager equipment,” Gibson continued, “were added [Dudley’s] genial personality, unbounded enthusiasm, ardent love for out-of-door life, and the keen receptivity and impressionability of the boys — the essential elements for a successful camping trip.”

Originally coined Camp Baldhead, the camp, along with its then 23 young men, was moved to New Jersey’s Lake Wawayanda the following year and

eventually found a permanent home and steadily increasing numbers on Lake Champlain in New York State. The camp was renamed in Dudley’s honor after his death in 1897.

The legacy Dudley started, a YMCA network of camps that rapidly spread westward reaching thousands of children and youth across the U.S. and around the world, is apparent in Camp Dudley’s continued mission “to develop boys’ moral, personal, and physical skills in the spirit of fellowship and fun,” and further in its proud motto: “The other fellow first,” a reminder to campers to “seek something higher than their own self-interest.”

A GOVERNING BODY

The early 1900s saw camps of all kinds popping up everywhere — private camps that catered to the well-to-do, camps promoting healthy recreation for the infirmed, camps for young ladies promising a spiritual respite from the drudgery of city work, and more.

There were likely more than 100 YMCA camps and as many privately owned camps by 1902. Conversation between these respective camps’ leaders eventually led to the first camp conference held in April 1903. Attended by 98 men and two women, “the speakers and participants represented a cross section of lay and professional men prominent in educational circles, law, medicine, and religion, along with YMCA and Boys Brigade leaders, the heads of several Boston settlement houses, Eastern private schools and camp faculty,” wrote Eels.

Out of the conference came the General Camp Association as a means of bringing together camp directors concerned with common social and organizational issues faced by many camps of the day. This earliest camp association seems to have dissolved in 1910 as it was replaced by the Camp Directors Association of America (CDAA).

This larger, better organized group was conceived by Alan S. Williams, a frequent camp lecturer on natural history, who brought together a

committee of camp directors in an attempt to create a camp exhibit for the annual Sportsman's Show in 1911.

The committee eventually focused on Williams' concerns about camps that seemed ill prepared to deal with the steady influx of new campers and whose lax standards seemed ill advised when it came to the safety and well-being of their attendees. Many early, influential camp leaders became members of the CDAA and met regularly.

Williams is quoted as describing the CDAA as the "model and standardizing influence in organized camping for the young." He further stated there was no reason why the CDAA should not "exist forever and annually increase in potency, as a benefit to its members, their camps, and the whole professional and educational institution of camping."

The CDAA merged with the National Association of Directors of Girls' Camps in 1924 and became the Camp Director Association (CDA). The organization changed its name again to the American Camping Association in 1935. Williams, for his contributions to the standardization of organized camp, is known today as the founding father of the ACA.

EXCEPTIONAL PROGRAMS

Simply the American Camp Association since 2005, ACA has built a century-old tradition of exceptional programs and quality standards that allow children and adults the opportunity to learn valuable lessons in community, character-building, skill development, and healthy living.

ACA is dedicated to building "camp communities committed to a safe, nurturing environment; caring, competent adult role models; healthy, developmentally appropriate experiences; service to the community and the natural world; opportunities for leadership and personal growth; discovery, experiential education and learning opportunities; and excellence and continuous self-improvement."

Camps were and continue to be a

mirror for societal changes on many levels, playing an enormous role in socializing children and youth to embrace those changes that have kept America moving forward with positive momentum.

For example, through female pioneers like Laura Mattoon at Camp Kehonka, female campers in the early to mid 1900s were introduced to a world with more promise than the one they had known.

Eels wrote of Mattoon, "She lived fully in the present and gave freely to her campers and colleagues. But her face was turned to the future in anticipation of what it might hold for her girls and what they might contribute. She understood well the place women were to occupy in the twentieth century and the many ways in which the camp experience could provide preparation."

Forty-one camps for girls were organized between 1892 and 1910, and that number skyrocketed to more than 100 by the 1920s.

FOREFRONT OF EQUALITY

Camp, too, has been on the forefront of programs for racial, cultural, and social equality. Talbot once wrote, "In camp, poor and rich lads stripped to their swimming trunks are on an absolute equality; the best man wins. Courage, generosity, goodwill, [and] honesty are the touchstones to success in camp."

There was a time when children with disabilities or serious illnesses were shuttered away to live a life of isolation. But post-World War II notions brought children with disabilities and other ailments into the open and created a number of camps that catered to their needs and allowed them to build self-esteem and have experiences in nature similar to those of children with no physical or mental challenges.

People involved in early camps had an intuitive understanding that the experiences to be found there would be good for children and youth. Chances are, with city dwelling a continued and even broader reality today, and more and more technology removing the necessity

for significant human contact, our camp forefathers and foremothers would be excited that their vision for camp as a place for getting in touch with nature and learning to relate to one another is alive and kicking, and having an enormous impact on the lives of thousands of children.

Eels said it well when she wrote, "Camp's common bond is the concern for people in their relationships to one another, to the environment, and for their sense of community."

May the hopes of camps early visionaries echo the hopes of our camp directors and faculty members today as the 150th anniversary of organized camp nears. May the lasting legacy of camp continue to be a growing number of individuals who will use their camp experiences to change the tide of social reclusion in our country and as a catalyst for becoming our steadfast, forward-thinking leaders of tomorrow. **P**



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