

CAMPSTAFF NOTES

By Lyle Novinski

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It is easy for my mind's eye to open the consciousness of particular situations of time and place during the many camp seasons, the variety of these are of course triggered by viewing photographs of specific events, many are not. I was indulging the other night, awaiting sleep, on the phenomena of the Camp as I knew it in the 50's, young staff, barely legal Camp Director, and a sense of complete confidence that we could make the place function at a good level of achievement.

One memory is of a few random staff members gathered in the dining hall after things were over for the day, indulging in the set aside left overs the cook had deemed available for the staff late night scavengers. Earlier stand off positions on what was and what was not available had endangered the proper usage of some left over materials for the day's meals, and interrupted the calculated economy of the cook in their best use. Once settled into a routine of appointed availability, these night snacks settled into a routine, varying personalities, same game, a joking review of the day in parts that would embarrass a particular member, a rejoicing at a good happening,

As I ponder the nightfall in the long summer evenings, beginning with the view from the Jambo cabin porch, then new and my residence, as Handicraft Staff, where in the western sky the appearance of the first star, and the quieting of the darkening camp, a sense of ownership common to all of us invades the psyche. It is only in the distant years that the marvel appears that a camp could be running almost entirely on its own, staffers in charge of an area, functioning well, and a young Director who had the trust of oversight, but more importantly, a visible trust in what the staffer was doing hour by hour.

I recall now, almost no grumbling, conflicts of personality, resistance of any kind, only the great umbrella of the fun of it all, even in uncomfortable circumstances. "Do you think that the rain will let us get the program up in time this morning?" as we lay on our damp bunks, warmed by several layers of cover, with a bit of body shiver.

Instead there was that overriding confidence that we collectively were up to the challenge, and not only the challenge, but the open door for even more loud noisy application of the imagination to the skits, songs, and general life in a camp in the forest.

We were trusted by distant elders in Freeport , our Council headquarters, with making it all work, adjusting each new season out of the memories remnant of the former year into a new cast of characters and habits. I used to say that in the third week the new season really began, for two weeks we had been running on the remembering of last year's doings and successes.

The miracle to me of it all was that trust, that when the officials present on Sunday drove away, we were in charge of it all, in our collective care, initiating each

day's activities out of our own being, of their own making, from our own imagination, toothing the gears of camp life into a smoothly running mesh of disparate gears of differing sizes, different functions, and directions, into a smoothly running machine, in which all parts knew exactly what was going on in every area, and their part in its success, though we may have never touched the details of rifle range, handicraft, or the laying of the fires on the hill.

Trust was incipient, improvement was a contagion, offering new layers to the dialogue of a demonstration on the lakefront where Hillestad and Butler performed a hilarious demonstration on how to empty and re-right a swamped canoe. I think a generation of public television comics cut their teeth on such public improvisation.

It is hard today to imagine such a world, in my view, colored as it is by the warm remembering of the Staff. Time is a strange thing, our young capable staffers carried within a load of experience of a world that is out of view of our young today. Things are just different. Within me, and within the parents of my staff there were the years of the depression and the war, wartime scarcity remembered, the public sharing of everything from information of where the troops were, fathers and sons, and certainly, in my case, the Scoutmaster, away in the defense of the nation. There was the general sharing of clothing outgrown, and the satisfaction that a few changes of clothing were sufficient for life, a life that required white shirt, coat and tie to almost all public events.

That backbone was accepted as a life buttress in my staff, and what was not understood was given the shelter of an enforced habit. Still, I marvel at the sense of responsibility and ownership that pervaded the Staff in their tasks. Partly it was the leadership, partly it was the internal ingredient of inherited support and responsibility beyond one's self.

I recognize many of the same things in my own grandchildren, who stand in for my laboratory of the general public; there are enough of them to constitute a good sample of their divergent ages, 18, from college graduation to kindergarten. I however have to recognize that they must also work through the maze of experiences available to them, a life that is pretty much a mix of the home ground compound (where we live together, three houses and 10 grandchildren) and the artificial filmed broadcast world of their outer experiences. Into that world I have also no opening, only the trust that they will make of it what they need, and avoid its warping influence when push comes to shove.

Whatever we can do to encourage another layer of young men to enjoy the Camp Staff experience should be undertaken. Somewhere between the history and the mystery is a forming experience which contains values that are nearly eternally strong. I speak here from personal experience watching three of my sons absorb the experience of being on the Staff, and watch it return easily in casual talk, where a dripping Texas morning will bring forth the line "Do you think it will clear in time to get the program going?"