

## CAMP OZONE/KERN: From the Beginnings to 1923

A proper history of the Dayton YMCA camp in Warren County is probably impossible, at least when the writer is someone who spent many summers there, first as camper, then as Leader. For history, if it is to be reliable, should be objective, and who of us oldtimers can be objective about a place we loved so much? Or, for that matter, what young boy who, from his first glimpse of the great mass of Ft. Ancient looming up above the Little Miami River could ever think of the fort or of the camp, which from the very start of things was so intimately connected with the fort, without losing his objectivity?

For each new camper the first trip to camp was packed with emotion. It was a journey of discovery, an encounter not only with the mystery of the Mound Builders but with the beauty of nature and an exciting new way of life. Actually, for most boys there was a whole succession of firsts: first time on a railroad train, first long hike ever (six miles from Lebanon to the camp), first time away from home, first experience of group living with others than family, first instruction in swimming, first tennis, horseshoes and volleyball, first responsibility for keeping living space scrupulously neat and clean, first discovery that there are many, many varieties of birds and trees, first campfire and so on and so on. It was all exciting and tremendously important. Even as one looks back decades later, although actual events stand out clearly, everything tends to be colored by emotion. So at least this opening chapter is bound to be a mixture of the objective and the subjective - as much nostalgic memoir as it is history.

It is not accidental that the first fully equipped camp was established in a location on the Little Miami River from which there was a fine view of Ft. Ancient. For, as a matter of fact, before that site was selected there had been some small-scale YMCA camping right on top of the fort itself. It all began with an extended overnight hike from Dayton to Ft. Ancient and back. This outing was undertaken in the summer of

1910 (June 29 - July 1) by fourteen boys from Dayton led by Carl B. Kern and fourteen from Piqua led by Christ F. Kunz. The thirty of them set up temporary camp close by North Lookout Point, spent two nights there and then hiked back to Dayton.

In the June 15, 1911 issue of "Men of Dayton," a regular Dayton Y publication, under the heading, "Camp Ozone," is the following announcement: "Beautiful Fort Ancient will be our camping ground again this year, from July 17 to 29. Only a limited number can go. If you are interested, ask for circular and register." A similar announcement appeared a year later, "We are unusually fortunate," the notice says, "to be able to camp in this historic spot; any of our old campers will tell you what fun it is to hunt for arrow heads and explore the mounds made so many, many years ago." But at the same time there is reference to a schedule which includes "two swims a day," and this is puzzling. Did those hardy campers really go up and down that long steep hill twice a day to swim in the river below? It would seem so, for the picture of boys in the "swimming hole" in the May 30, 1912 issue of "Men of Dayton" must have been taken at or near what was to become the regular swimming place a year later. Those of us who belong to a later, softer breed can only wonder and admire!

Some months after the end of the 1912 camping session the Dayton YMCA purchased a 68-acre farm on the west bank of the Little Miami River and established a permanent camp there, retaining the name "Camp Ozone." In that sometimes muggy valley the ozone was not quite so pure and refreshing as up on the fort, but the convenience and spaciousness of the new site, its beautiful woodlands and long frontage on the river made this location in many ways ideal. And right across the road from the camp proper stood, and still stands, a magnificent early nineteenth century stone farmhouse. Probably few of us appreciated its architectural distinction and historical importance but we must have had a sense that it was a landmark of sorts, and it was good to have contact with a working farm - another first for many. Best of all, though, beginning in the summer of 1913 the real Camp Ozone came into being in a place which

for the next thirty years was to be the favorite spot in all the world for hundreds upon hundreds of boys and men.

Although much careful planning and solid and generous support of YMCA officers, directors and members were necessary to bring the new camp into being, no one ever disputed the fact it was the vision, dedication and determination of one man, C.B. Kern, that were of crucial importance. The camp was his dream, and it became his reality. Not many of us are left who knew the man himself but we all know the legend he became. Furthermore, all are agreed that there could be no more fitting memorial to this remarkable man than the camp that now bears his name. We think he would have agreed.

That first summer, 1913, in the then new camp was divided up into three ten-day periods. The total cost per boy for each period was \$5.50, including railroad fare from Dayton to Lebanon. This fee went up only gradually over the next several years. In 1922 it was \$10.00 - post-war inflation! In many camp folders of the period the list of items to bring to camp ended with: "Above all - a sweet disposition."

It is interesting and perhaps fitting that just as those first campers in 1910 started out as hikers, so the boys who came to the new Camp Ozone had to hike part of the way to get there: from the railway station in Lebanon six miles to the Little Miami River and the camp. And this tradition continued on at least through the 1920s. Many oldtimers still insist that the experience of Camp began on that dusty trek over that little-used country road. There were always some leaders along, and some of them wasted no time in introducing new boys to the varieties of birds and trees seen along the way. Especially second or third year campers started right in on the nature part of emblem requirements and got certified as having identified ten, fifteen, or twenty birds and/or trees before they even came in sight of Camp.

Some of us will never forget one of the most amusing episodes that took place on that familiar stretch of road. This was in the days of fence-post advertising, the

most famous of which were the Burma Shave jingles. Mail Pouch chewing tobacco and various kinds of hybrid corn were also familiar signs. And there was another that read simply "Gabriel Snubbers", the name of a popular brand of shock-absorbers. There was one such sign on a fence-post right near the entrance to Camp. This apparently **was** the first such sign one of the new kids had ever seen. He read it aloud, "Gabriel Snubbers", and then in all seriousness asked, "Is that the name of the Camp Director?" Well, it had not been up to that point but from then on it was, for Paul H. McKee, the greatly beloved camp director of the 1920s, could never get rid of that new name. (I have an idea he did not even want to, for he had a great sense of humor.) For ever after he was known affectionately as "Pop Snubbers." And his staff of Leaders were called "the Snubbers family." It was, by the way, a family we were all proud to belong to.

But this gets somewhat ahead of the story. To come back to the C.B. Kern years, we find that in that first summer down in the valley the boys lived in simple canvas tents, five boys and a Leader in each tent. And we are told that there were four brand new unsinkable steel rowboats. (Some of them were still in use, along with a number of newer ones, half a dozen years later.) And in the summer of 1914 the first two canoes appeared. Then and later the canoes were available only to those boys who had been certified as competent swimmers.

In addition to the two canoes the summer of 1914 saw also the provision of wooden platforms for the tents and the rough beginnings of two tennis courts and equally rough baseball diamond. But most important was the construction of the Council House, an admirably designed multi-purpose building which was to become in many ways the heart and center of camp activities . In the middle there was a big meeting-room with huge fireplace for campfires on rainy nights, a wrap-around screened porch, a well-equipped kitchen, storage rooms, ice-house, cubbyhole for camp store, space for wireless equipment (there was at one time or another instruction for wireless buffs),

and seven years later, after Mr. Charles F. Kettering had donated a Delco generator and pump, there were electric lights instead of the familiar kerosene lanterns, and flush toilets to replace the primitive, old-style "Perch." Dining tables were lined up on the south porch from which there was a full view of the dirt road from Lebanon, sweeping down from the hill, with its treacherous hairpin-turns, all the way to the bridge. Not that there was any traffic to watch except on Sunday, visiting day, when parents drove down - sometimes even girlfriends of the Leaders.

Even in the second and third summers of camping up on the fort the cooking was done by Buford Shobe, and, once the permanent camp was in operation, both Mr. and Mrs. Shobe were in residence presiding over the kitchen. It was perhaps partly the fresh air and lots of outdoor exercise that made the food taste so good, but it was not just that, for Buff was a master chef, as the meals he served in the old Boy's Building on Third Street clearly showed. The food was plain but plentiful and well-prepared, and there was no pampering of fussy appetites: boys ate what was set before them even when it was dishes they had always despised and refused at home. Frequently they discovered that they liked the previously rejected things after all.

For our bread there was no butter but nobody seemed to care, for our regular spread was delicious apple butter and huge quantities of it. But "applebutter" was a word one never heard: it was always "Smuckers." And this was long before the Smucker Company in Orrville became nationally known. The request most often heard at table was "Please pass the Smuckers."

Buff was more than just our cook: he was a man we looked up to. He was cheery but forceful, an altogether fine human being. No one questioned his authority either in the kitchen or on the baseball diamond where he was our favorite umpire.

The saddest chapter in the history of Camp Ozone/Kern came in 1917 just as C.B. Kern was getting ready for his fifth summer at the camp he was so proud of. On June 3 the auto in which he was riding was struck by an interurban car on the Old

Troy Pike near Triangle Park. Mr. Kern died in Miami Valley Hospital a few hours later from severe multiple injuries. The whole Dayton community was shocked at the news. Editorials about him appeared in all area newspapers. One of them read in part: "There are few homes in Dayton today - homes with little boys in them - that do not grieve for the passing away of Carl B. Kern, director of the boys' department of the Young Men's Christian Association. . . Taken in the prime of his manhood, in the prime of his ambitious undertakings, in the prime of his service to Dayton, at a time when hundreds of his little friends found in him a teacher, a friend and big brother, he has left a vacancy that will be hard to fill." It was soon after this that the Board of Trustees of the YMCA voted to change the name of the camp to "Camp Kern."

One of the most eloquent tributes of all was the drawing by the staff artist of the Dayton Herald. It shows a boy slumped down in dejection on a chair. At his feet his little dog looks up at him with concern, and behind him hangs a large photograph of C.B. Kern. Through his tears the boy is saying, "Every kid in town wuz friends to C. B."

Those friends are now a rapidly dwindling group but they still cherish the fondest memories of that big handsome leonine figure of a man. One of them, Robert ("Jobby") Johnson, recalls that in the days when he worked for C. B. in the coat room of the old Boys' Building "he used to give me a dime at supper time, and Paul Smiley would go over to his mother's sandwich shop and bring two hamburgers."

The successor to Kern as Boys' Work Secretary and Camp Director was S.C. Britton who had been serving as Physical Director. His tenure, however, was very brief. I remember him rather vaguely but favorably. He could not help but suffer under the handicap of standing in the shadow of his former chief.

Jack Prosser, who succeeded Britton, stands out more clearly in my memory but he too stayed only a short time. Jack was a friendly, thoughtful man who was intensely interested in individual boys, and I got to know him well. He was, moreover, the

only camp director of our era whose wife was also a camp resident. She and Jack lived in the director's lodge which stood maybe fifty yards beyond the Kiowas, the last lodge in the line.

Paul H. McKee, already referred to above, took over in 1920, three years after the death of Mr. Kern. Like C.B., he exercised an enormous influence on a whole generation of campers, if five years make up a camper-generation, as it seemed to them. Like Kern, "Pop" was a tall man - over six feet - but not so husky as C. B. and without his great head of hair: Pop was quite bald and looked older than he was. He had a marvelous sense of humor and a low-key, subtle forcefulness that endeared him to everyone in camp. Year after year he assembled an outstanding group of camp Leaders. This is not just my evaluation, who was one of them, but it comes from many recent testimonials from former campers of the early twenties. They speak of how deeply their lives were affected by the boys who were their camp Leaders, singling out now this boy, now that, as ideal teacher and friend.

This is all the more remarkable because when Pop had confidence in a boy and thought he would do a good job he chose him, no matter what year in high school he was, and, incidentally, except for the associate and assistant directors, all the leaders were high school students. Some of us began after our sophomore year. We were, I suppose, too young to have misgivings about the awesome responsibilities we were undertaking. But somehow with the quiet help of Pop and of older young men like Orv Wright, Cliff Carey, Bill Lantz, Bob Welchans and others we were able to pull it off. That we could do it at all when we often had boys under our charge who were our own age or even older was a tribute to the insight and good judgment of Paul McKee. And although we had no knowledge whatever about theories of child or adolescent psychology (we were, after all, adolescents ourselves), our uncomplicated ease and naturalness with our charges may have been an advantage. Certainly, we were none of us "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

We must have made mistakes but one can only hope they were minor, for boys' lives are too important to be damaged by thoughtlessness or misjudgment. I have, for instance, worried for years about our trips to the "haunted house", which house was actually the old abandoned church at the top of the hill. We used to take groups of boys there in the dead of night and send them in singly while one of the Leaders rattled some old rusty chains and another moaned and groaned as ghosts were supposed to do. Not all the kids were frightened and one can hope that those who were scared soon got over it. It is perhaps significant that I have no recollection of the haunted house trip in my last couple of years at Camp. My guess is that Pop quietly and unobtrusively let it be known that the ghost was now laid.

Probably under all administrations of the camp there was some modicum of sex education. I remember that there was a selection of sex books in the camp library, most of them of the Winfield Scott Hall type and probably of questionable value. But at least the facts were available, albeit not necessarily in the most helpful form. Much more helpful was an off-hand comment that Pop McKee made to me one day. I don't remember the whole context but one sentence was profoundly illuminating and has stuck with me all through the years. He said, "Sex may be the most important thing in life but it is not the only thing in life."

From the earliest days of Camp Ozone right down into the middle twenties at Camp Kern and probably beyond, the daily program was organized along pretty much the same lines: One woke up to the blast of the little <sup>n</sup> canon up at the Council House and then there followed reveille, that is, in those summers when we had a bugler. Next was a line-up by tents or lodges to make sure that everyone was present or accounted for, and then there was a mad rush down to the river for a cold dip - always without benefit of swimming suit. Then came, in more or less this order: getting dressed, flag-raising, breakfast, camp duties, athletics, morning swim. After the noon meal



there was inspection of tents/lodges (neatest each day got to hang a big American flag over the entrance until inspection next day), a long free time in the afternoon - a time for boating, hiking, reading or working on emblem projects. In late afternoon there was another swim, then supper. After this each tent or lodge met for Bible study with its Leader. There followed the big campfire ceremonies - a time for singing, story-telling, the public reading of the "Firefly," the camp daily newspaper, a serious talk and the performance of various skits. Then it was off ~~to~~ bed before 9:30 or so.

This busy schedule was unlike the free and easy, more or less wide-open plan at some camps I knew of. I have always believed, however, that the carefully structured program at our camp had great advantages. It made for closer group identification, gave boys the sense of being responsible and important members of the camp community, kept them busy much of the time and may have been responsible for the low incidence of homesickness. Maybe most important, the patterned life seemed to be more fun.

Many of the inspirational talks given at Camp and during the year at various gatherings at the Dayton YMCA emphasized service and unselfishness. In the case of the guys at Camp Kern these virtues were more than rhetoric. Enthusiasm for the camp and devotion to a succession of fine camp directors led to an astonishing outpouring of volunteer work during the months when Camp was not in session. In the winter gangs of men and boys used to drive down to Camp to cut ice from the river and stash it in the icehouse for use the following summer. And in the spring other crews would go down to do general clean-up, skin the grass and weeds off the tennis courts and the baseball infield and do minor repair jobs. The most ambitious and impressive volunteer work came in May 1919 when nearly 100 men and boys, many of them honest-to-goodness carpenters, went down to camp to help build the new Adirondack lodges. In charge of the project and, like everyone else, unpaid volunteers, were J.I. Lambert, head of the manual training department in the Dayton schools, and most

of the manual training teachers in the various schools. Enough was accomplished in that one day so that the work could easily be completed by smaller crews in the succeeding weeks.

In addition to regular camp duties like caulking the wooden flat-bottomed boats that had replaced the original steel ones, repairing the dock, hoeing and pulling weeds in Zimri Urton's field across the road, boys used to take turns on Sunday cranking away at <sup>a</sup> mammoth hand-turned icecream freezer on the north porch of the Council House. Another chore was to carry the milk down from a dairy farm at the top of the hill. This meant hauling an immense can ( It took two boys to carry it <sup>it</sup> it must have held ten gallons) down that steep gravelly road.

Yes, it was very much a "do-it-yourself" camp. There was occasional grouching but we got the jobs done without any fancy rationalizing by anyone. Modern educational psychologists might say we were engaged in an important "learning experience." For us it was just part of being at Camp.

As already noted, the Adirondack lodges were built in 1919. Seen from the riverbank they formed a wide-angle, inverted "V." Each lodge had the name of an Indian tribe: Yukis, Mohicans, Choctaws, Apaches, Catawbias and Kiowas. The initials of course stood for "YMCA - Camp Kern." The trail that led from the road past the Council House and across the little bridge over the usually dry creek-bed entered the lodge compound <sup>campfire</sup> area and volleyball court - at the point of the "V."

In each camp period the rivalry of tribe against tribe was intense and loyalty toward the tribe was strong. Each tribe even had its own song which was belted out enthusiastically at the slightest provocation. The tunes were borrowed from songs of World War I, like "Ja-Da" and "How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?" The lyrics were written by various Leaders and were pretty awful. I recall that two of the main perpetrators were Jean Jones and Don Miller. Here are

some sample lines:

"Yukis all are happy  
Yukis all are glad . . ."

"Choctaws, Choctaws: we're the tribe that always wins . . ."

"How you gonna keep us from winning  
In everything?  
Our hat's in the ring . . ."

"We're gonna win that ice cream dinner!  
Sure as shootin', we'll be winner . . ."

Clearly, the talents of the Leaders lay elsewhere!

Going from the lodges to the dock it was wise to keep to the cleared area, for there was a vicious stand of nettles off to the right. A few hundred feet upstream was the "monkey tree," a sycamore that projected grotesquely over the water. And on the opposite bank right across from the dock was a big tree, the crotch of which served as our high-dive.

Boating and canoeing were confined to the upstream stretch of the river - the direction of the "Riffles." But boat-races always took place downstream from the dock to the bridge. On at least one occasion some of the Leaders got well acquainted with the territory beyond the bridge, for one night after a heavy rain the swollen river tore some of the boats loose from their moorings and a search-party had to go looking for them.

Even under normal conditions we had to take account of the current in the Little Miami. During every swim lifeguards were in their boats patrolling the swimming-hole, and they were especially watchful when the current was swift. I can remember fishing a kid or two out of the water into my boat on a day when it would have been prudent to cancel the swimming.

In those early days at Camp Kern the old Indian fort was not just something we looked at from a distance: once each camping period there was an overnight hike up to the place where it had all started - North Lookout Point. We carried our mess-kits

and bedrolls, walked across the old iron bridge (it served on other occasions as our running track for fifty-yard dash contests), past the railroad station and Ft. Ancient Hotel, then cross-country to the beginning of the foot-path that led almost vertically up to the top of the fort. Food was hauled the long way around by road in the redoubtable Ford truck that every day chugged over to Lebanon to pick up supplies and provisions. On one such hike I was chosen to ride in the back of the truck to keep things from falling out and the beans and lemonade from spilling out of their containers. I succeeded after a fashion but ended up with shoes full of lemonade.

In our time, before the work of restoration and preservation had been undertaken by archeologists and the Ohio Park Department, a large area on top of the fort was a cornfield, and that field was a good place to look for arrowheads and pieces of Indian pottery. An even better location for such discoveries was a cornfield down below on the east bank of the river not far from the Ft. Ancient Hotel. And the best time to look was just after plowing or cultivating when the ground had been turned over. Local tradition had it that this had been the site of an Indian village. In any case, one way or another, almost any kid who spent time seriously looking came up with a trophy worth taking home.

In all this we did not realize that we were disadvantaged: we had no resident archeologist or historian. Nor did we have on the staff any trained naturalists. Such experts would have been a great help. Even so, we learned a lot about the environment, especially trees and birds, for among the leaders were a good many guys who were knowledgeable even if self-taught. They made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in expertise. The proof of their success as teachers was that in many of us they kindled a spark of interest that was never quenched.

For me, Camp Kern is the place I first became fascinated by birds. I have been an avid bird-watcher ever since. But, exciting as it was in later years to see roseate

spoonbills in Florida, puffins in Nova Scotia, African hoopoes in Egypt and malachite kingfishers in Tanzania, I have never forgotten the thrill of spotting my first redstarts in the saplings between the Council House and the Mohican lodge and my first American bittern up at the "Riffles."

Trees interested me less but we all soon learned the names of most of the species that lined the riverbank and many of those in the deep woods of the hills above the lodges. And who of us can ever forget how to distinguish between the American elm and the slippery elm? I can still feel the sting of the slippery elm leaf on the back of my hand when some older, slightly sadistic kid showed me the difference. And I never see a paw-paw without thinking of the ones that grew along the path leading steeply up to North Lookout Point of the fort.

Trees, birds, Indian lore, life in the open, athletic competition, hiking, swimming, boating, learning how to get along with all kinds of kids, forming lasting friendships, memorizing Bible verses (for many, the only ones ever to be learned but also never to be forgotten), finding a new beauty in nature and a more satisfying feel for life - all this and more is what Camp was all about during the first twelve or thirteen years of its existence. But, more than this, for many, Camp was a world apart, a near-paradise to which we all looked forward through the long Ohio winters. Our time there was a supreme vacation by which all later vacations would be judged. And, finally, after Camp Kern none of us could ever be the same again.

Chad Dunham  
Camp Ozone/Kern 1918-1923