

A MOTH-EATEN EMBLEM AND JOYOUS  
RECOLLECTIONS OF OLD CAMP KERN

Perhaps this story should begin with some old emblems found in an old trunk--one for Camp Ozone and several for Camp Kern. Mr. C. B. Kern was a tall, Lincolnesque man. He was effective in initiating camp development for the YMCA. In Dayton, Ohio. After his tragic death in a truck accident while he was headed for Camp, it seemed only natural to rename the Camp for Mr. Kern.

My experience both as a camper and later as a counselor began in the summer of 1914. Weeks previously my parents had agreed to allow me to spend a 10-day period at Camp

Please come with me!

I packed my tennis raquet and swim trunks and a few other special items. Thanks to my mother there were also packed the bedding, the clothing, some rain gear, etc.

The morning of the big day of departure, we met at the railroad station near Fifth and Ludlow Streets. It was almost as unusual for a young boy to board a train with a coal fired locomotive in that day as it is today. Instead of using autos, however, which were not common in those days, we usually stayed home!

The train ride was glamorous--it was only my second ride on a railroad. After a couple of hours or so we arrived at Lebanon. The only transportation available from Lebanon to Fort Ancient was the overladen and overworked Camp truck. This meant that we campers had to hike the seven miles to camp.

The hike was a big deal for a 9 year old. Our established pattern was to stop with our bag lunch at an old school house.

Here there was an ancient pump and delicious water was available. After a lunch limited by the fact that it had to be carried by hand from Lebanon, we made our way to the top of the big hill and then down, down to the Camp on the Little Miami River. Here feigned exhaustion was the order of the day.

Our Camp cook, a Negro named Buford was immensely popular right from the start. In fact, he was so highly respected that his umpiring on the baseball field was always welcome and seldom questioned. After an adequate dinner following our arrival and a night of deep sleep we were ready to make a success out of the Camp program - no matter what!

There followed a swift succession of days. Early in the morning the cannon went off. We all turned out for brief calisthenics and then a dip in the river--no heated pool! This was followed by flag raising with a short devotional talk then breakfast.

After chores our real day started, We were divided into tribes--Yukons, Mohicans, Choctaws, Apaches. Competitive sport was the order of the day--baseball, volleyball, foot-racing on the bridge across the river, racing on an obstacle course, tennis, etc.

The bridge was important to us. Auto traffic was almost non-existent and the bridge was the only level stretch in the whole area.

At 11:30 we enjoyed our morning swim. The good swimmers had special privileges--like swimming all the way across or down to the bridge! - the non-swimmers received special attention.

When the "all out" signal was given we reluctantly climbed up on the dock and up the path by the oar box to the tents. On one beautiful summer day we were tempted to do a little exploring on our walk back and discovered nettles! How they can sting!

Another of my strong recollections is the time we came out from our swim and found something unusual clinging to the sensitive parts of our bodies--under arms, back of knees, etc.--leeches! We just pulled them off and kept on going.

After a lively luncheon period with announcements, and Camp songs, the Camp store was open for purchase of candy and knick-knacks. This was followed by inspection of our tents (in later years cabins) and the neatest, best kept tent was awarded the flag for the day.

In the afternoon we had free time in which we worked toward qualifying for a Camp emblem with informal assistance of the counselors, who were called "leaders". This consisted in memorizing Bible verses, identifying trees and birds, etc. Later on boating--canoes and rowboats--baseball, tennis filled up the time until the afternoon swim at 4:30. In the afternoons we always wanted more time than there was to do all the many things available.

After the swim, there followed dinner with competitive group screaming, cheering, and singing. After this performance each tribe selected its own place for devotions, Bible study and prayers.

Finally we all attended the big bonfire--each tribe took its turn at collecting the wood and building the fire. A prize went to the tribe with the best bonfire. Around the campfire was a time for storytelling, singing, informal skits, etc.

After the bonfire our tent leader had brief devotions in which we were given the opportunity to make sentence prayers.

All in all, it was a big day and sleep was easy when the lights went out.

One night in each period we climbed up the steep path to the top of old Fort Ancient, a mound-builders fort, built by people

who pre-dated the Indians. There we roasted hot dogs and marshmallows amid story and song and evening devotions. We dug "hip-holes" and spread out our ponchos and blankets.

One memorable evening on top of the old fort, before supervision closed down on us, we got into an old cornfield. The stalks came out of the ground easily and made wonderful weapons for hurling. Our exhilaration was ecstatic. Mud and young boys have a natural affinity. It was great fun.

Another exciting change in our routine was the coming of a storm. Of course tent flaps were closed, lines adjusted, and rain gear dug out. But that was just the beginning. The little dribbling brook by the side of the lodge became a roaring torrent. This brook is a marvelous place to search for trilobites, brachiopods, corals and other fossils. When a storm washed out the places that had been searched by dozens of eyes and a new stream bed was exposed, the findings were more numerous. We all found parts of trilobites but the objective was to find a good specimen in which the eyes and nose and mouth were visible.

The river would rise and rise and rise. The rowboats and canoes were occasionally swept downstream. The oar box was threatened. The leaders had the task of making their way downstream, searching for the lost equipment. Then they had the problem of getting the boats back to Camp. It was a total Camp effort filled with interest and excitement. Somehow the river always seemed to rise fastest and highest at night when we were all asleep.

When rain drove us into the big lodge there was no end of competitive games--often blindfold that kept us on edge. One game was particularly riotous. Two boys were blindfolded, given a rolled-up newspaper. Then, lying flat on the floor and clasping their free hands, the swatting began. The objective of the hand clasped to your opponent's hand was to disguise your true position causing your opponent to ridiculously swat the floor instead of your head.

Sunday was a very special day. Religious services were observed under one of the giant trees near the lodge. "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies" was sung in such a way that it really stayed with you. The service was interdenominational and everyone attended.

Other things also made Sunday exciting. We all took our turn at cranking the home-made ice cream freezer. Our arms almost dropped off but it was a labor or love--the best ice-cream there ever was.

Also, Sunday was visitors' day. This meant our parents or our friends' parents would come to Camp. Often a visiting parent brought a treat, like peanuts or watermelon, and we all had fun.

Another thing should be mentioned. During World War I almost everyone had a victory garden. In keeping with the times Camp Kern plowed and planted a large area across the road from the Camp. We campers did the work--an hour or so each day. It was so hot! We worked so hard! Interestingly it didn't hurt us a bit--and it helped our national effort!

Another chore that had special rating was a two-boy job carrying the big milk can from the farm at the top of the hill down into

Camp. It was heavy and awkward to carry--but we managed.

When the end of the period came and it was time to leave Camp, we all geared up for the seven mile hike back to Lebanon. Staying for a second period stirred a tinge of enthusiasm. For most of us, however, there was the question of more money, parental consent and whether or not there was an opening for another boy.

When we arrived back in Lebanon there was another time honored ritual. We all went to Ivin's Drug Store and enjoyed a delicious ice cream confection.

The train ride home was relatively peaceful--we were tired from the hike and our appetites had been sated. I recall one big worry--we had adopted a collie mutt wandering about the Camp and living on bars of soap plus whatever else he could find. He had to be tied in the Baggage car and I was greatly relieved when we got him safely home!

Of course Camp Kern life did not end when the train reached Dayton. Some acquired nicknames at Camp that persisted for years. One boy messed up a swimming race by failing to complete his leg of the race. Sometime later he assured us that is would never happen again! Somehow I felt that we all grew in character.

The joy and success of a camp depend not on the new pool, the pleasant lodging or the other facilities but on the leadership. The leadership of Camp Kern was of an unusually high moral character. A typical example of this leadership was Mr. P. H. McKee. His favorite Bible verse, he confided was Luke 2:52, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." He said if we can only increase like that, we will be allright.

Fall visits to Camp, gathering walnuts, Camp dinners,  
presentation of awards - have all added to the tradition of joy  
which emanates from old Camp Kern.

Richard T. Schwartz  
3713 Otter Place,  
Lynchburg, Virginia  
24503

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