



Reminiscences of camping 50 years ago

By Val Willis

With Summer Camps 2008 now looming on the horizon, let's do some reminiscing and go back to camping 50 years ago.

In the never-to-be-forgotten year 1958, I became a director of a children's camp, little thinking that the next 30 summers would be spent in the great out-of-doors.

The busy months of preparation before the official opening are vividly etched in my mind: finding a suitable site, locating qualified staff, planning program, and becoming familiar with standards necessary for accreditation in the Provincial Camping Association, etc.

As all entrepreneurs know, there has to be something unique to attract potential clientele. With the co-operation of the United Nations, the word 'WELCOME' appeared in nine languages on our brochure and crest. This led to further co-operation from the Director of the Junior Red Cross who readily accepted a notice for an essay contest with the topic 'An Act of Friendship' to appear in their magazine circulated in many schools. (It was printed in the March 1958 issue.) The winner would receive a free month of camping.



Next, off went a letter typed on a secondhand Underwood typewriter to ask the recent notable winner of the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize to act as judge of the contest. It was Lester B. Pearson.

Fifty years ago it was exciting to find a messenger at your door holding out a yellow envelope – a telegram! Being the kind person that he was, Mr. Pearson readily stated that he would be pleased to be the judge. The young boy who

won the contest wrote a short story about when he was six years old and afraid to walk to school because two boys always threw stones at him as they also did to his friend, Henry. His wise father suggested that he and Henry should walk to school together. The story ended with this being done and soon all four boys became friends. The winner felt that by helping Henry he was really helping himself to overcome being frightened.

It wasn't long before young people from France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Mexico, Venezuela, Pakistan, the U.S. and even Japan felt at home in an international atmosphere, especially when they saw a United Nations flag flying on the tall pole near the lake.

The biggest difference in operating a camp 50 years ago and today would be in communication. No camp could possibly exist today without a website available to inquiring parents just by clicking on a mouse. Wow – the philosophy and program of camps around the world to choose from!

Fifty years ago that would be impossible and parents would spend much time contacting provincial camping associations for directories. As for camp directors, endless hours and great effort would be spent sending monthly



newsletters to parents and campers, hiring staff and purchasing equipment. Mailing was phenomenal. In modern language, it was awesome. The computer has really revolutionized all our lives, including camp directors.

The most exciting of 30 years as a camp director was 1967. Expo '67 was a time when all Canadians felt tremendous pride in their country that was welcoming visitors from all corners of the earth. Everyone devised a plan to participate in the celebration. Our plan was to invite young people from foreign countries who were working at Expo as weekend guests who would mingle with our campers and tell them about their countries. Ken Toi Wong from Hong Kong told about the history and culture of China; Lawrence Vengah from Ghana mesmerized campers with stories about Africa; V.R.Naik from India discussed the philosophy of Karma and Brahma; Hans Gerriken of Holland enjoyed his weekend so much that he later sent a book, *Thank You, Canada*, published in recognition of the moral and military support that Canada gave the Netherlands in her struggle for freedom from 1940 to 1945.

The best part of each day was when we all gathered around the campfire in the evening to enjoy songs, stories, marshmallow roasts and unparalleled camaraderie.

Undoubtedly we were all feeling the magic within! What a wonderful experience it was for campers (and staff) to be exposed to different cultures around the world and to realize that basically we are all alike – wanting to love and be loved.

One event that happened 50 years ago would never be repeated to-day when there are dozens of specialty camps, even rock camps for grown-ups!

For the last two weeks of the summer, a group of diabetic children and their medical staff arrived to enjoy a taste of camp life. They participated in regular activities, but the infirmary was much busier than usual. With more activity than they were accustomed to, the campers' blood sugar would sometimes drop and they would quickly find one of the many bottles of Coke conveniently placed around for use if needed. Two years later, this special group was fortunate enough to be able to buy a camp of their own.

The most dramatic night in 30 years involved a much-anticipated overnight camping expedition for five riders and their horses under the supervision of a capable instructress, Linda. With great excitement the girls did their packing while Linda saw to it beforehand that water, oats and hay were taken to the designated site some distance from the stable. The stillness of the evening was unexpectedly broken when thunder and lightning and torrential rain descended upon the happy group.

Imagine arriving at the scene to hear the pitiful

neighing of horses but not another sound! It was the beam of a flashlight that lighted upon a large plastic raincape spread out to protect five little riders huddled around Linda who were too frightened to say a word.

In what seemed like ages, the horses were safely settled in their comfortable stalls while the relieved riders were nestled in warm beds in the infirmary where a motherly nurse served them hot chocolate and assured them they could sleep in and have breakfast in bed.

Fifty years ago directors did not have to set restrictions re the use of cell phones, laptop computers or i-pods. Possibly the only restriction was related to sex. Boys and girls were expected to respect the privacy each section provided. Needless to say, summer romances were to be expected among staff members.

Fifty years later, a camp is still regarded as a wonderful place for young people to appreciate organized freedom, to learn to love nature, to have maximum personal growth and positive development, and to enjoy the satisfied sensation of achieving.

Friendships that start in a camp usually last forever. And the young campers of to-day will be our leaders of tomorrow. Bless them all!

Val Willis was director of Camp Wilvaken in Quebec for 30 years, and is a former teacher and for 20 years has been a docent at the National Gallery. She has been President of the Quebec Camping Association, and was the first chair of the Ethics Committee for the Q.C.A.

A few years ago, she published the book My Horse, My Passion, written by her late daughter Kenra when she was 11, and donated the first \$10,000 of the proceeds to the Canadian Cancer Society. She is now donating proceeds of the third printing to the Almonte Hospital as a permanent memorial to her daughter. You can order books from valwillis@sympatico.ca.

