

S'more the merrier

SUMMER CAMPS ABOUND FOR EVERY KIND OF KID, FROM ATHEISTS TO PRE-CRIMINOLOGISTS. BUT THE TRADITIONAL, STEEPED-IN-NATURE-AND-BUGSPRAY VARIETY REMAINS KING OF THE FOREST.

By Lisa Black

Lisa Black is a Tribune staff reporter

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Summer camp has changed little over the years at Phantom Lake.

The kids sleep in rustic platform tents, barely separated by worn screens and canvas from the dark stillness outside.

Thirteen-year-old Evan Warner, attending the camp in Mukwonago, Wis., for his fourth year last summer, e-mails a poetic missive to describe life away from his home in Wicker Park:

"It smells like trees and grass and nature in general here," he writes. "When nobody is awake you can hear lots of different bird calls and the sound of leaves rustling in the wind. There is nothing creepy except when a lot of people are in the boys' bathroom--it smells strongly of body odor."

Three hundred and fifty miles and several worlds away is the Powerchord Academy, a rock 'n' roll camp at Washington University in St. Louis. Elias MacRoberts, 15, from Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood, persuaded his mom to let him go last summer.

Campers there focus exclusively on practicing and performing--Elias' fingers were aching by Day 3 from playing his guitar for eight hours a day. They also record a CD, make a music video and potentially meet up with a favorite band.

"A lot of the people there were really, really good and have been playing since they were 6 or 7," says Elias, a guitar player with his own band, The Function.

Campers sleep in air-conditioned dormitories, and while there is no swimming or hiking, they do walk about a mile a day to get from one building to the next.

And here's something you don't hear often about camp: "The food was amazing," Elias says. "If you wanted a pizza, you could just say, 'Pepperoni pizza,' with whatever extra ingredients. They would just start making it for you. It was like a big restaurant with everything. They even had sushi."

With programs catering to every youngster's passion and need, a camp is just as likely to meet on a boat dock or in a college science lab as among tents in the wilderness.

Now, with the ground still frozen, many parents already are searching for the perfect summer camp for their child, scouring Web sites and brochures, even hiring camp consultants to narrow the choices. Other parents started last fall to secure a bunk in a camp with a red-hot theme or a select group of campers.

About 10 million children and 1 million adults attend an estimated 12,000 summer camps a year, a number that includes both residential and day camps, according to the American Camp Association. Camp directors

have had to compete with and adapt to not only the myriad programs available to kids, but also to such outside forces as shifting lifestyles, shorter attention spans and even terrorism.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, parents became more protective, leading at least one Jewish camp to install an electronic gate at its entrance. Parents have begun keeping children at home longer, waiting until age 10 to send them to camp rather than 8, says Jill Tipograph, an independent camp consultant.

Families also are asking for shorter sessions, often so they can enroll their children in more than one program, says Tipograph, who charges \$500 and up to help families narrow the choices.

Camps have grown very expensive, with the most exclusive ones typically costing \$7,000 or more for a seven-week session.

The expectations of parents, in turn, have escalated.

"Fifty years ago, if you came home from camp healthy and happy, that was enough," says Keith Klein, director of Camp Laurel in Readfield, Maine, which enrolls about 20 to 30 children a year from Chicago's wealthier suburbs at a cost of \$10,000 each for a seven-week session.

"Today, that's a given. You also come back much better at tennis, horseback riding, lacrosse, or able to slalom on waterskis or windsurf," he says.

Or analyze a crime scene.

The Applied Technologies in Conservation Genetics Forensic Summer Camp, at Central Michigan University, stretches the word "camp" to modern-day limits while tapping into the popularity of television crime-solving shows.

The camp logo is a dismembered teddy bear, its stuffing strewn about it, with this disturbing statement: "And no one heard him scream."

Geared toward high school students, the first day of camp includes an introduction to DNA and polymerase chain reactions, and a critique of a CSI episode.

"There's so much interest in forensic science right now," says Bradley Swanson, an associate biology professor who put the camp together. "I'm on a university campus and there are sports camps, band camp, cheerleading camp. I thought, why not a science camp?"

Campers were assigned a case to determine whether a hunter was properly licensed, and the crime scene was a cabin in which campers found hair and meat samples from deer, elk, bear and cows to analyze and identify.

Klein, at Camp Laurel, views such camps as part of a continuing phenomenon in which children are more interested in "collecting experiences" than returning to the same camp for eight or nine years. He tries to keep them coming back for at least six years, though the time spent at camp also has shortened.

"The camps used to be a full eight weeks," Klein says. "Now most are 49 or 50 days. That speaks to the overprogrammed child. They're going from one thing to the next."

A few of the more misery-inducing camp traditions have changed as well. Counselors are better trained to handle bullies and cliques. And if a child reports home that he or she is not getting along with a bunkmate, some parents push to let their child switch.

But that is where it can become easy to lose the true lessons of camp, laments Tipograph. "[Parents] feel entitled," she says. "They say, 'I'm paying, so I should have a say.'

"[But] part of going to camp is learning how to be tolerant, how to be flexible. . . . It makes me sad. They're not allowing these kids to make mistakes."

Still, risk-taking is a common experience at any camp. For some kids, it means dangling from the treetops on a rope; for others, it's starting a conversation with a stranger. And camp remains a place where it's OK--required, even--to make fun of the food, pull disgusting pranks and tell ghost stories, where nervous girl-boy exchanges, at the co-ed camps, still run rampant.

And what modern-day camps share with the simpler, woodsy ones of yore is that the activities, no matter how elaborate or specialized, are merely the backdrop for teaching kids broader life lessons about making new friends, building self-confidence and tasting a bit of sweet independence.

In the late 1890s, overnight camps were introduced as a way to toughen up city boys--particularly white, privileged teens--by sending them out to the country.

Considered an extension of boarding school for the wealthy, the early camps attracted teens who were 17 to 19 years old, as a "bridge to adulthood," writes Abigail Van Slyck in "Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth."

At the time, Americans considered city living a threat to the boys' health and morals, and they worried that the teens would succumb to urban temptations. Sending a boy to camp also wrested them away from doting mothers, who were blamed for softening the boys and, in essence, leaving the nation at risk.

"In some ways it's very much an invention of the Victorian Age," Van Slyck said in an interview.

"There was great worry that America's boys were becoming sissies, and that it might hurt America's military might."

YMCA camps at the time resembled military encampments, where the boys wore uniforms, awakened to a bugler and began the day with calisthenics. By the early 1900s, Camp Fire Girls and the Girl Scouts were among the first to offer summer camp to females.

Over the next 20 years, camps would focus on activities that reflected their natural settings--hiking, swimming, arts and crafts.

After World War II, summer camps enjoyed a heyday that lasted through the 1960s, coinciding with a time of economic growth and more choices for children.

By the 1980s, camps had branched out and become so specialized that some feared the demise of the old-fashioned, traditional sleepaway camp. Less expensive day camps proliferated.

But many families yearned to hold on to the true camp experience, and in the 1990s the pendulum began to swing back, possibly as a backlash to some children's increasingly structured life.

It's part of the reason why Gail Warner, mother of the body-odor-conscious Evan, likes Camp Phantom Lake.

"It's not one of those 'Tennis anyone?' camps," she says. "The place is old, old, old. It's not one of those upscale, snazzy places. And I love that they call it Phantom Lake because it sounds like what a camp should be. It sounds like a scary book."

Phantom Lake's roots, as a YMCA facility, are Christian-based.

"Back in the early days, there were Bible studies, a chapel session where all the kids would dress in white," says Eric Stein, spokesman for Camp Phantom Lake, which, at 100 years old, is one of the YMCA's oldest camps nationwide. "The big focus was taking kids from the inner city to learn about God."

Over the years, the camp downplayed the religious program while ramping up the universal values of honesty, respect, responsibility and caring.

Jewish summer camps have taken the reverse approach, initially offering children a country escape from urban ghettos in the early 1900s and moving toward more faith-based and Zionist themes, says Jerry Silverman, president of the New York-based Foundation for Jewish Camping.

Just a few hours north of Chicago, the Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute, commonly referred to as OSRUI, sprawls comfortably across 200 acres, yet is nearly hidden within an affluent neighborhood in Oconomowoc, Wis. Despite the serene setting, parents were pleased when the camp added an electronic security gate at the main entrance in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, says camp director Jerry Kaye.

As the Midwest's camp for Reform Judaism, it drew children from the Chicago area and well beyond to enjoy sailing, horseback-riding, high ropes and all the other makings of a fine summer camp. They also attend religious services twice daily and take part in in-depth discussions led by well-known Jewish educators and rabbis, as well as Israeli visitors.

Older teens speak only Hebrew during camp, while younger children create talent shows with such themes as "Teenage Mutant Ninjew Turtlestock."

"I came in knowing minimal Hebrew," says Josh Bloomberg, 19, a counselor and former camper, from Chicago. "I ended up being able to speak not just conversational Hebrew, but being able to hold deep discussions with Israelis. . . . The language connected me to the people of Israel."

Most campers sleep indoors, in some of the 65 buildings on campus. But some opt to bunk in traditional platform tents, where canvas flaps are raised in the daytime and wet clothes hang on clotheslines nearby.

Some of the kids have trouble being away from their e-mail. And while they are allowed to bring iPods, they may use them only in the bunks, during rest times.

"It's good to get them out of their lives and routines and to push them to do things they're not comfortable with," says Joanna Fleckman, of Evanston, a premed student and former camper who has been coming back as a counselor.

OSRUI newcomer Sari Kreines, a 7th-grader from Racine, Wis., agrees.

After bedding down on the first night last summer, she and others were awakened at 4 a.m. by counselors, blindfolded and led on a "trust walk."

The kids wound up at a fire pit, where they told stories, then made their way to the beach and participated in a sunrise service.

She struggled briefly with homesickness, but made friends quickly. At night, the other girls taught her to sing "the moon song" when she was feeling lonely.

God bless the moon and God bless me and God bless the somebody I want to see.

A DECIDEDLY DIFFERENT experience awaits those who enroll at Camp Quest, started in 1996 for the children of "atheists, freethinkers, humanists and brights."

Last summer, the common theme at the camp's six locations was "Beyond Belief."

"We don't teach the kids that there is no God," says August E. Brunsmann IV, director of the camp's site in southwestern Ohio.

"We try to promote values of secular humanism, though not everybody at camp wants to call them that. Enlightenment values. A focus on logic and reason and how to learn about the world."

Besides taking the traditional archery and swim lessons, campers spend a week trying to prove that two invisible unicorns said to be on the campgrounds do not exist. The winner is awarded a "God-less dollar bill."

Nobody has ever won.

Camp Quest allows kids to fit in without being judged for their religion or lack of it, Brunsmann says.

He recalls the time a boy who had been raised Catholic attended camp at the urging of his grandfather, an atheist.

"As far as I know, he was still Catholic at the end of the week," Brunsmann says.

Some say that one of the beauties of a sleepaway camp is that none of the kids has any preconceived notions about each other based on how they act at school or home. It's a fresh start. Yet there always seem to be kids who get picked on or excluded.

Over the years, social dynamics have not changed, agrees Dr. Joel Haber, a psychologist based in White Plains, N.Y. But the way the camp counselors are taught to handle the situations has improved.

"We grew up thinking this was a rite of passage," says Haber, who for the past three years has held training clinics for camp directors. "It's really not. Wherever there are power dynamics and kids form their own social ladder, there will always be cliques. Kids on top sometimes use their power to get their way and kids at the bottom can be bullied."

Today counselors learn to recognize budding problems, talk them over with the campers and turn the situation into a learning experience, rather than grounds for punishment.

"No camp is immune from this kind of thing," Haber says. "It's the way the camp deals with it."

A child's desire to be accepted by others, and an idyllic place that offers such acceptance, are the reasons behind the success of the One Step At A Time camp.

Developed for children coping with cancer, the camp has become a safe home away from home for kids like 12-year-old Nicole Grace Wright.

"I go there because I have brain tumors on my spine and my head," Nicole says matter-of-factly.

Wearing green plastic shoes and purple-frame glasses that match her lavender shirt, Nicole stood out in a crowd during camp last July at Aurora University in Williams Bay, Wis. The camp, about 88 miles northwest of Chicago, is surrounded by forest yet outfitted with enough modern amenities to handle medical emergencies and chemotherapy treatments.

She greeted newcomers and dispensed hugs to guests and staff, most of whom are medical professionals, all of whom are volunteers. Nicole's pockets were stuffed with necessities: hand sanitizer, Chapstick, highlighter, deck of cards, tissues, felt-tip pens and a joke book.

What is a frog's favorite drink?

Croak-a-cola.

At One Step, a typical conversation between kids could be about who has more bug bites, whom they plan to ask to the next night's dance, or what kind of chemo made them puke.

The high-ropes course for teens training to be counselors is a rite of passage. It's a scary but empowering experience, say campers who already have faced a disproportionate amount of fear in their lifetimes.

"The best part of camp is coming back to see your friends," says Kyle Harvey, 18, of South Holland. He's been coming for 11 years, after being diagnosed with a form of stomach cancer. "You don't know if you will be able to see them again."

But for the most part, the camp strives to be like any other.

A favorite prank the counselors play on the kids is the "snipe hunt," says Jacob Drescher, the camp's chief fundraiser and the only employee on the payroll.

During the nighttime hunt, young campers search the woods for the elusive snipe, a large, terrifying bird with laser-like red eyes. To attract one, the kids clack rocks together as they search through the brush.

"Counselors have been known to get bit (by the snipe)," Drescher says somberly. "Luckily, no one has perished and a snipe has never been caught."

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FAVORITE CAMP MEMORIES

Damian Kulash

Lead singer, OK Go

--Tim Nordwind, who became our bassist, and I met over a Ping-Pong table at an art camp in Michigan. He was 11, I was 12, and we discussed the dark sorcery of impressing girls, which we understood mostly through tenets provided by my older sister: Carry your books at your side (not clutched to your chest), always have gum to offer and, most important, even if it looks cool in jeans commercials, never lean against the wall with one foot up and your arms crossed. Summer camp was a great place to test our new moves--none of the kids was from our own schools, so the scar of a total crash-and-burn rejection from a girl would be less permanent. It really was a great time, and I met several of my lifelong, closest friends there.

Steven Levitt

Economics professor at the University of Chicago, author of "Freakonomics"

-- I was way too much of a sissy to ever seriously contemplate going away to a sleepover camp. But one summer I did work up the nerve to attend a computer-programming day camp. This was back in a time before PCs, when data were stored on punch cards and 20 kids had to share two computer terminals. I was the youngest kid, by far the smallest, and extremely timid. Thus, I didn't get much time on those precious terminals. To pass the many idle hours waiting for terminals to free up, we played board games. I got up the courage to challenge the self-appointed chess champion to a match. When he realized he had lost, he grabbed the board and threw it violently toward me, scattering chess pieces across the room. I told my father what happened. I don't think he has ever been prouder.

Kate Neumann

Pastry chef at mk

-- I was a picky eater, which was problematic at home. Not surprisingly, given my profession, I favored sweets. At camp in Wyoming, I subsisted on cereal, bread and candy. On day hikes, no one minded that I never touched the bologna-and-mustard sandwich smooshed in my bag. It was my decision, and I started my meal with a mini candy bar or two, finished with an orange and washed it all down with "bug juice," fruit juice made from powdered mix.

-Compiled by Chris McNamara

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