

The Camp Sequoyah Program and Operations, a Model for Today's Camps

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Precamp

Staff was asked to arrive a week early for orientation and training. Some could arrive even sooner, but often the camp cooks arrived during that training week. For all of my years, Chief, Bill, and Bruce were lucky to have the same primary cooks...Grace and Mary were cooks from college fraternity houses in North Carolina. The head cook for Chief did change when Bill took over for one year but this head cook remained throughout Bruce's tenure. He was awesome, but a little temperamental. Since my wife, Ginger, was the dietitian, however, she could disarm him every time with her sweet nature!

Clearly, all cabin assignments for counselors and all their program appointments were done prior to the staff arriving. When we first got into camp, we went directly to our assigned cabin and we were responsible for getting it ready for opening day. In addition, all staff had to have their program areas ready for showing on opening day. Thus, the orientation schedule was pretty tight. We usually worked our tails off!

Counselors are handed the personal profiles of their campers when they arrive and are expected to study each parent's description of their child. These profiles included responses about what the parents would like to see their son achieve or gain while at camp, observations of current needs and weaknesses, personality descriptions, wishes for particular activities, special interests offered at camp, special dietary needs, special religious requests (i.e. attend Catholic Mass or Jewish Synagogue) . We took notes and were held accountable by the program director and Tribal Leaders for accommodating the parent's wishes. We learned then that we were to write weekly letters to parents showing what activities the camper participated in and what progress he was making in interpersonal relationships or in activity achievements.

Precamp orientation topics covered included: first day orientation and tax-form stuff, met by Tribal Leaders, and then work in the assigned program area. The first morning started with a camp tour, followed by an explanation of the job description of a camp counselor. After dinner on the first full day, we saw the Camp Movie and promotional material shown to the public, the Program Director handled the introductions, and the Director took over to discuss his philosophy of camping and of what Sequoyah really is (building the total person). After a question and answer period, we had a social and just had a good time.

Each morning of orientation, just like the daily camp routine, we started with Morning Watch in the council ring. This was a 20-minute quiet time with some guided reading or reading of the Bible (with suggested scriptures for young people). Some just sat and reflected...truth be told, some probably finished their nap. But it started the day off right! On Sunday, we had a Chapel service and during my tenure, I usually did that opening service with a special topic called "Kissing Frogs".

During the orientation, each program area and its entire staff met with the Director and Program Director to discuss expectations, safety, working with children, etc. During these days, we experienced examples of evening programs like Friendship Councils (Sunday night activity), fun councils (just a fun-filled campfire program), etc. In extra time, we mowed grass, trimmed trees, picked up limbs and trash, cleaned up the grounds, repaired steps, etc. We had business sessions with the staff that included: Nurse comments about safety and daily health reports from counselors, Store manager comments, Director minutes, Dietitian comments, quartermaster rules, how transportation works, how days off works, and how opening day procedures will work.

Chief did not assume anything! He did not assume that campers or staff were already gentlemen and knew manners...that was one of the jobs of the summer camp. Regarding table manners...at a first meal or so, Chief went through in detail exactly how to enter the dining hall, how to set a table, how to hold a fork and knife, how to ask for food (we ate family style where bowls of food were placed at the table), the counselor's role at the table was that of the dad at home. He taught staff how to sit up straight, how to sing the prayer for each meal, how to discipline ill-mannered boys at the table. Family style meant that we ate together, we talked together, and we did everything together. It was great. Parents were so impressed when their boys got home and acted like gentlemen! Chief expected his staff to teach boys how to be real men...not like those on TV. He spent time telling boys and staff what a real man did, what was expected of him, and what he was on the inside. That's what we spend our summers doing...living lives worthy of emulation by the boys in our charge; and following up with them during the winter.

At the end of orientation, we all went on a "cabin supper" together completing every step that cabin counselors were expected to do to teach their campers. How to use poncho's, how to build fires even in the rain, what to do on trips, first aid, etc. The last night of orientation was a night off...away from camp...but with a curfew getting ready for opening day. Pop did a lot of this kind of stuff. He also showed how and where to hike. A knowledgeable staffer always went on the first hike to a site to show us the way. After that, we were on our own. Now we have GIS!

Believe it or not, Chief had two wonderful sex talks prepared. One for counselors during orientation and one for mid- to older campers during each session. They were frank but entertaining 'father-son' talks that boys and young men needed to hear. I did some of those in my later years. That may not be "politically correct" these days, but they were really awesome and carefully done, and still desperately needed.

During this orientation week we had free swim, we played volleyball, we had softball games, and we just had a good time because we really worked hard the rest of the time.

Camp Session

Opening day was great. As families drove up, they were greeted by Chief or Bruce, campers were introduced, the Program Director checked off the just-arrived camper, the counselor was called to the parking lot to meet the camper, parents went to the business office to finalize their stuff, then to the infirmary if necessary, then to the boy's cabin, and then a camp tour by those boys who were old campers...or who knew their way around if the counselor was unavailable.

The younger campers lived in Junior Camp and were the Chickasaw Tribe. These were boys mostly 7-10 y/o with five campers to one counselor.

Senior Camp was divided into four tribes with boys aged 11-17 y/o:

Cherokee – boys 11-12 (most were 11 y/o) in the rising to the 5th and 6th grade.

Catawba - boys 12-13 (mostly 12) going into the 6th and 7th grade.

Tuscarora – boys 13-14 (about equal number of each age) going into 7th and 8th grade.

Iroquois - boys 14-17 (mostly 15 y/o) going into the 8th and 9th grades.

Cabin groups in Chief's years had seven campers and one counselor. Because of cost constraints, Bruce went to eight campers and one counselor. The positive influence of the cabin counselor on the campers in his cabin and under his leadership was the driving force for Sequoyah's magic...as with any camp.

Tribal leaders were members of the administrative staff and had supervisory responsibility over the cabin counselors and the program staff, including heads of the activity departments. The tribal concept was critical since it served as a unified program unit, allowed for relatively small numbers of campers to engage in equal activities or special age-related activities, and provided a more efficient and effective administrative mechanism for staff.

Memorable experiences

Some things about Sequoyah were just unforgettable and contributed to long-term memories by everyone. Just saying these words or names brings back floods of memories for every single camper and staff member. In my opinion, these are the things that you should give careful consideration to and try to recreate some or all for the new era of camper.

Morning watch - 20-30 minutes of quiet time in the council ring every morning except Sunday. It was essentially Time Spent Alone. All could read inspirational things. Absolutely no talking allowed. Went from Morning Watch directly to breakfast.

Tribal hike – once a week, an all day hike that usually begins and ends in camp. To places like Bald Knob, Craggy Pinnacle, Court House Knob, Lane Pinnacle, Richland Knob, Rich Knob, Carter Creek Falls, Potato Field Gap, and others.

Cabin supper – cabin overnight, all cabins in a tribe goes on a specified day. Multiday overnight can be arranged easily as skills increase.

Chapel service/ Inspiration Point – Sunday morning in camp. Catholic kids were taken to Mass if their parents wanted. Campers and staff wore “whites” to chapel. White shorts, white shirt could be Sequoyah T-shirt or white shirt of any kind. The beautiful view is now mostly overgrown but I’d clear it out in a heartbeat. I think Chief would want the view for himself and Mrs. Chief.

Friendship Council – a tribal inspirational campfire on Sunday evenings at the Tribal Council Ring. Each tribe had its own special Tribal Council Ring, individualized and very special place.

Fun Council or Tribal Night – could be a fun campfire program in the tribal council ring or could be a huge game played over the whole camp property. Mainly just a tribal activity as determined by the creative Tribal Leaders.

Cabin cleanup – the winner in each tribe won the Coup Stick at their steps for the day.
Rest hour - these speak for themselves. Not much napping but good interaction time.

Cabin night – a cabin activity led by the counselor doing whatever and occurred on the evening of the tribal hike.

Cabin Devotions – bedtime devotionals led by the Cabin Counselor. Non-denominational life lessons from today’s camp experience or from inspirational stories. Could develop into short discussions with a moral.

Special trips – took tribes to Sliding Rock; Cherokee and "Unto These Hills"; Biltmore House and Gardens; Mountain Dance and Folk Festival in Asheville; Dance or party with a girls camp for the older boys;

Track and Field Meet – each session had a big variety-filled game day that could serve as a birthday party for everyone who had birthdays during camp.

Movie night – at least one Saturday night was a movie night in the lodge for everyone. Also came in handy on extended rainy nights. Mostly saw nature movies, i.e. Disney, but now there are some really good ones on DVD for this era of kids.

Closing Ceremony – Right after the closing banquet - Awesome closing night ceremony where all campers and staff have made their own candleholder from natural materials. Giant circle on the athletic field after marching out of the dining hall with candles lit. Sing a closing song. Candleholder and candle relit every Christmas Eve.

Old Sequoyan Club – a service organization where campers and staff officially become alumni. During induction ceremony, campers and staff move from station to station to receive the 6-8 classic lessons underlying the philosophy of “A Camp with a Purpose”...which is Growth as a Person (mind, body, and spirit). This could be reinstated immediately as an electronic

communication tool, you could create a tax-exempt organization, dues and donations were always given back to the community somehow.

Iroquois shower – This was simply the name for the waterfall under the dam. Very pretty place, ice-cold water, and a great place to run through...with or without clothes.

Skinny-dipping – a definite right of every boy to feel exhilarating, free, and safe swimming nude. Might not be looked upon with favor any more but most feel it should never have been taken away from our childhood. Shame on us adults!

Evolution rock – There is a large rock on the left side of the road on the way up to Tsali. This rock actually had most of the species of ferns that grew in North Carolina...even the rare walking fern. Climbers almost destroyed it. I don't know how it is right now.

Camp cooking – In the early years under Chief, we taught wilderness cooking expertise and had 2-3 day outings of Sourduff's (beginners) and Sourdoughs (real cooking experts). Woodcraft skills were a must and most boys became expert woodsmen.

The Thunderbird – the official camp newsletter that went out to all alumni 2-3 times a year.

The Hobachee – the weekly agenda for camp activities posted throughout camp.

“Mama letters” – weekly letters from counselors to parents on the progress of their son at camp and describing his activities and his personal growth. Letters were all reviewed by Tribal Leaders and others prior to sending.

The corn roast - Wow! Hundreds of ears of fresh, unshucked corn, soaked in the creek for 2-3 hours, huge hardwood fire built on huge flat roasting rock in camp, sweep coals from the rock and place the wet corn on the rock and cover with tarp...turn once. Melt butter in #10 cans, grill hamburgers or hotdogs nearby, pull shucks back and dip in butter. Pig out!

Grand Council – a major production of Indian Lore complete with full paint, painted council ring, Chief/Bruce/Director escorting all of camp into the ring, authentic Sioux ceremonies, dances, games, stories, etc. You need an expert in Indian Lore to teach the crafts and lore of Native Americans and do it appropriately. That is where we learned most of our American woodcraft from anyway. Very attractive program for campers and staff.

Cabin plaques – on their first day, boys are instructed in pocketknife safety and are told never to carve anything into the wood in their cabin. That is what cabin plaques are for...and they essentially last forever. They were wood burned or carved.

No electricity – This may no longer be up to code, but it was a rite of passage for boys to live together for a summer with only a lantern in their cabin for light. No electricity. No complaints.

The Half – another item that probably will not make code. Since everyone probably had a different name for a bathroom, at camp we called them “halves”. Cabins were numbered

consecutively starting behind Hoffman Cabin (the library). When it got to a bathroom, it was numbered with a ½ ...i.e. Cabin 7, 8, 8 ½, 9 ... where the half (8 ½) was the bathroom. Everyone called it the same thing. We had no hot water in the halves...only sinks with cold water and toilets. The shower had wonderful HOT water. New codes may make you put a bath and shower in each cabin...hope not. There were several halves throughout the campgrounds.

The lone telephone – There was one public telephone on the grounds...an old phone booth on the office porch. Boys could not use the phone without a counselor waiting outside, nor could there be any contact with parents or home until after the first week. Most homesickness had come and gone by then. There had to be a real need to give permission for a camper to call home.

Tsali – too much to talk about here. At the top of the mountain, this was the wilderness adventure guys...the tough guys who could do anything. They were giants in the eyes of campers. They built their own cabins over the years, built the Adirondack whose view first drew me to Sequoyah. You can do some really magic things with that part of the property...as you walk up through Mustard Flats. Steve Longenecker was famous for his daily morning run to Tsali, taking with him myriads of campers bent on keeping up with Steve...and with each other.

Tripping – Bruce Capps and Steve Longenecker introduced more out-of-camp adventure tripping into camp when they took over. They wanted boys out of camp on trips as much as possible...or as much as campers wanted. Once skills were learned (usually after 3-4 weeks of instruction, or after a 2nd summer of instruction), extended 3-5 day canoe trips, kayaking, horseback riding, climbing, backpacking, camping were all going on. Often at the same time. This was incredibly popular with kids. Others learned detailed in-camp skills.

Staff – campers all remember their counselor as their friend and mentor. Someone they could trust and someone who treated them with respect and valued them regardless of their age. There was never anything wrong with hugs, pats, or appropriate gestures when the right time came. One-on-one conversations and quiet interactions between camper and counselor in this pristine setting was a lifelong influence...usually for both. The summer emphasis was on interpersonal relationships built between the staff and the camper and the friendship bonds solidified among cabin mates and friends.

The Director was usually seen as supervisor or boss by the staff and a father figure and icon by the campers. That probably won't change. But Chief made a point to tell every staffer personally how interested he was in them and in everything they did.