

The Spirit of Camp Sequoyah

By Walton Conway

Many consider it sacred ground. A jewel in the crown of the Craggies, the Reems Creek Valley's pristine Laurel Fork shelters primeval hemlock and tulip poplar. And a tribe still exists that will tell you the place changed their lives forever.

Camp Sequoyah, once one of America's top summer youth camps, now lives only in memory. The Grand Council Ring—where as a boy I “Indian-danced” around glorious tribal fires—has become a nursery to 12-foot beeches, buckeyes and poison ivy. But a determined group of ex-Sequoyans is mounting a campaign to save the camp from the developer's ‘dozer, and to resurrect its founders' vision.

It's eerie. Even after 15 years of disuse, there's something indescribably alive at Sequoyah. In a 1949 article marking the camp's 25th anniversary, the Asheville News reported sensing something “intangible and at the same time substantial and permanent.” The glowing energy that enthralled so many campers still raises the hair on your arms—the spirit of Camp Sequoyah sleeping, just waiting to be revived.

Just beyond Beech Community, 17 miles northeast of Asheville, the campus site now sits abandoned, visited only by a steady stream of old Sequoyans, determined to rediscover and preserve, the cradle of their characters, the place where they grew up. One such pilgrim, acclaimed North Carolina writer Reynolds Price, introduced me—by way of his 1990 novel *The Tongues of Angels*—to the camp's founder, a man whose vision touched thousands. I'd heard so much about him, the longtime “Chief” of Camp Sequoyah who “blazed like a nova” and passed away when I was only one year old—C. Walton Johnson, my grandfather.

More recently, Price commented on what he called “the altogether unlikely miracle that [my grandparents] worked continuously and for so long at Sequoyah, “cultivating men of destiny.” Fun, prank-filled, hallowed and inspiring, a summer at the camp named after the inventor of Cherokee writing left an indelible mark on the souls of her tribesmen. In his fictional account, “firmly socketed in the whole Sequoyah world,” Price pays homage to that remarkable place that left its imprint on his and so many other souls.

The story of my grandfather's life-long quest to nurture others by upright example, and to teach that we are indeed our brother's keepers, is in itself inspirational. On Aug. 5, 1906, while waiting on a train that would take him to Buie's Creek Academy (now Campbell College), the 23-year-old Johnson jotted in his diary, “Strive! Strive and push forward! The glorious goal hoped for is reached only by the most strenuous efforts and lasting perseveranceThe noblest question in the world: What good can I do in it?”

A camp with a purpose

In 1923, while teaching high school in Asheville and working with the YMCA, Johnson was convinced by a fellow Rotarian that running a summer camp was the ideal vehicle for ministering to youth—for making, not money, but men.

Back from the front-line trenches of France, and newly wed, he drove his cranky Model T up into the hills of Buncombe County and happened upon a true beauty spot, an apple orchard, overgrown with bramble briars, once Cherokee territory. He talked his bride, Kitty Poole Johnson, into abandoning the city and her career as a professional musician and moving into an isolated, primitive cottage. With a broad axe, an iron will and lots of local supporters (it is said that at one time or another he employed the whole community), Johnson began to hew the cabins that would become North Carolina's first private camp for boys—Camp Sequoyah, “A Camp With A Purpose.”

Twenty-seven boys arrived in June of '24 to test Johnson's letterhead promise that Sequoyah would teach them “to see with their hearts, do with their hands, and live together in a spirit of brotherhood.” They quickly realized this camp was not merely a vacation solution, but a place, as Johnson said, “to pit strength against the elements, and to match wits with the cunning of wild life of the forests—[while developing] self-reliance and resourcefulness . . .” Sequoyah was also where many heard of environmentalism for the first time, as they learned to harmonize nature and humankind.

What happened was nothing short of phenomenal. Pioneering programs in woodcraft and Native American lore attracted national attention. Being child-centered, such programs fostered more than skills; personal growth and character development formed the measuring stick of success. Special guests, including writers Earnest Thompson Seton and South Carolina Poet Laureate Archibald Rutledge and the magnanimous Red Dawn, chief of the Sioux, visited to lend their stature. Boys from across the country and sea adopted the camp as a summer home, leaving by the end of each August a bit stronger and wiser, inspired by nature's beauty and the new-found potential within them.

Of the summer of '53, Price comments: “The 10 weeks laid deep foundations in me. . . the credible gravity with which Chief and Mike Hoffman and Red Dawn moved us toward an astonishingly rich and (in American history) premature but enduring sense of the fragility of the natural world. Above all, they led us to see ourselves as brief components of that world, not its masters—and components with endless hard duties for which, however, the reward was joy.”

At age 80, in his 43rd year as Sequoyah's Chief, C. Walton Johnson fell victim to a fatal heart attack, bequeathing to his children a legacy nonpareil. One must wonder what Chief would think if he knew his Elysium now lies fallow. The new owners kept Sequoyah running for a decade, but when managerial disputes festered in 1978, they locked a gate across her drive, and Sequoyah's 50 buildings—the Nature Den, once the one-room home of the Scotsman who settled McDaris Cove 150 years ago; the Retreat, another hand-hewn structure, originally the home of a missionary in the Cane Creek Valley; the cabin that came from Big Tom Wilson's place in Yancey County—all commenced to rot.

A spiritual mission

Enter Sequoyah Center, Inc., a dedicated group of alumni and friends bent on purchasing, restoring and reopening Camp Sequoyah. But with at least a million dollars to be raised, playing deus ex machina is not easy.

The project evolved spontaneously, catalyzed by old Sequoyans like Nashville musician Garrett Randolph, who claims he is “not willing to surrender Camp Sequoyah either to termites or developers.” He stirred Thomas Graham of Denver, an old camper who had been “haunted positively” by Sequoyah for years. They teamed up with others, registered a non-profit corporation, and recently revived “The Thunderbird,” Sequoyah’s old newsletter, in an urgent attempt to reach alumni and potential patrons before it’s too late.

“It’s a spiritual mission,” explains Graham passionately. Chief Johnson, says Graham, was the most influential figure in his life’s development.

Preserving the undeveloped land, now up for sale, is of primary importance. One hundred fifty pristine acres strewn with huge-waisted hemlocks and towering tulip poplars backed up against the Woodfin watershed and Blue Ridge Parkway: “It’s a natural resource that must be saved at any cost,” Graham proclaims.

A positive response from the local community has reinforced Sequoyah Center’s aim. “So many people out here don’t want to see the land sold and developed,” says Caroline Daszewski, a retired school teacher who has lived in Beech Community off and on for 18 years. “The community is supportive morally and physically,” she adds, noting that opening up the camp would breathe new life into more than just the campus.

Price, one of the dozens involved with the Center, agrees that getting Sequoyah back is more than just a healthy proposition: “America needs everything it can get in the way of serious attention to young people. Chief’s basic thrust of developing better human beings is absolutely necessary to America and the human species.”

When writing *The Tongues of Angels*, Price made his way back to Sequoyah after an absence of 35 years and found more than bats roosting in his old cabin: “. . . despite the overgrowth of cedars, the rotting roofs and reduced lake. . . I found the heart of the place entirely alive and waiting for a vision as strong and benign as Chief’s.”

If the Sequoyah Center proves successful in its bid to buy the camp, it won’t be long before the rills of laughter once again rise to the surrounding pinnacles of Bald Knob, Snowball and Mt. Mitchell, and a heritage as rich as the mountains themselves will live on. But for now, one must listen carefully to hear it. . . the rhythmic thump of the tom-tom, the heartbeat of Camp Sequoyah—echoing silently among the hemlocks.