

Museum publishes book on Adirondack kids' camps

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, July 28, 2006

LAKE PLACID — In the final season of its four-year exhibition on Adirondack children's camps, the Adirondack Museum has finally come out with a book to serve as a companion to the exhibit.

The book, like the exhibit, is called "A Paradise for Boys and Girls: Children's Camps in the Adirondacks," and it makes a case for the special importance of youth camps to this region.

The YMCA's Camp Dudley (outside Westport) is, after all, the oldest continuously operating youth camp in the country. Dudley had its beginnings in the Catskills in 1885 but was moved to its permanent site on the Adirondack coast of Lake Champlain in 1892.

Since Sumner Dudley's first experiments with youth camping, there have been at least 323 residential children's camps established in the Adirondacks. Some lasted only a year or two, but some — including Old Dudley — continue to operate today.

The three authors of "Paradise" — Adirondack Museum curator Hallie Bond, University of British Columbia assistant professor Leslie Paris, and Cornell University professor Joan Jacobs Brumberg — explore the history of Adirondack kids' camps, their influence on the lives of campers, and the camps' impact on their host communities.

Work on the exhibition and companion book began nearly a decade ago

when the Adirondack Museum hired Leslie Paris to compile a detailed research report on Adirondack camps between the world wars, a topic she had already chosen for her doctoral disserta-

tion at the University of Michigan.

Bond, who had already put together the Adirondack Museum's exhibition on boats, was the curator assigned in 2001 to develop the new exhibit on children's

HALLIE E. BOND, JOAN JACOBS BRUMBERG, & LESLIE PARIS



CHILDREN'S CAMPS IN THE ADIRONDACKS



With a Foreword by Philip G. Terrie

"A Paradise for Boys and Girls: Children's Camps in the Adirondacks," by Hallie E. Bond, Joan Jacobs Brumberg and Leslie Paris. Syracuse University Press. Released June 30. Hardcover, oversize pages, 264 pages, 135 B&W photos, 1 map, subject index. SRP \$39.95. Amazon.com \$26.37 (no S&H

camps. The new book is designed as an accompaniment to that exhibit, which opened in 2003 and will remain open for visitors through the end of this October.

THE CAMPING exhibit includes displays of artifacts from woodcraft programs, swimming beaches, the famous camp “stores” — one of them just a two-wheeled cart rolled out on the director’s porch after lunch — and letters home from campers collected in a loose-leaf notebook laid out on a camp cot in a recreated dorm cabin.

“The key to any good exhibit is the objects,” Bond said when the exhibit first opened, “not the theatrical stuff or the interpretive billboards.”

There’s lots of summer fun evident in the artifacts displayed in the new camping exhibition — “but we wanted to look at the more serious side of camping, too,” said Bond.

“Camping has always been an educational endeavor. Its heyday was in the 1920s, and they were trying out every educational idea imaginable on these kids — and they had them 24/7 to work on.”

That emphasis is evident right from the start of the exhibition, where the roles of values, skills, tradition, environment and woodcraft in the camping experience are explored in a display.

“Community and character,” Bond said, “were what many camp leaders believed the camping experience was really all about. Rewarding kids for keeping their rooms clean, as well as giving ribbons to the kids who could jump the highest or farthest, were pretty important parts of camping.”

MANY OF THE most common camping traditions, like the campfire or council ring, date back more than a century to Scouting and Woodcraft pioneers like Ernest Thompson Seton, according to the “Paradise” exhibit and book.

Brant Lake Camp for Boys, founded in 1916, claims to have created another annual ritual at many summer camps, the “Color War,” in which the entire camp breaks down into two teams for extended scavenger hunts, song competitions, sporting events and all-night “capture the flag” contests.

Another ceremony commonly used to close a camping session was said to

Summer camps in Lake Placid

The Adirondack summer-camp phenomenon has been felt in Lake Placid as much as anywhere else in the North Country. According to an online database of Adirondack summer camps, developed by the Adirondack Museum in conjunction with the “Paradise” exhibition and book, there have been at least eight such camps here over the years:

- The first was called the “French Recreation Class for Girls.” Believed to have been the first exclusively girls’ camp in the country, its session lasted 14 weeks and cost between \$225 and \$300 — in the 1890s! It closed in 1897.

- A camp known only as “Lake Placid” operated for just eight summers, from 1918 through 1925. The staff of seven took care of 20 boys. Like the earlier girls’ camp, this one offered “French lessons ... to all the boys who wish.”

- The longest-running children’s camp in the Lake Placid area is Camp Treetops, established in 1921 on the campus that would later also become the home of the North Country School. Treetops is still oper-

ating, and you can visit it on the Web at www.nct.org

- Three music camps for kids operated on Placid Lake in the post-World War II years: Birchwood (1948-63), Minnowbrook (1949-77) and Grenwolde (1952-56). Birchwood, on Whiteface Bay, was acquired by the state and its buildings were torched. Camp Minnowbrook is now a private camp, while Grenwolde is now known as Camp Solitude and is operated as a summer lake inn.

- Camp Undercliff, operated on the upper West Lake from at least the 1930s until 1956. In addition to music, Undercliff offered campers a more traditional array of summer-camp activities, including riflery, water skiing — and ice skating at Lake Placid’s Olympic Arena!

- Camp Woodsmoke, established in 1964, is the only children’s camp still operating on Placid Lake. You can visit it on the Web at www.camp-woodsmoke.com.

Want to check out the Adirondack Museum’s online summer-camp database for yourself? Go to www.adirondackmuseum.org/paradise/index.html.

have originated in the Adirondacks. Candles lit at the closing campfire were taken down to the lake, placed on tiny birch-bark “boats,” and set free to float out onto the water.

Most Adirondack camps were more traditional — and more expensive — than camps closer to the cities, Bond said.

A majority of the Adirondack campers were Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, or members of religious groups, both Christian and Jewish.

“There were quite a few Jewish summer camps up here,” Bond said. “They were an outgrowth of the Jewish emphasis on education.

“In the Catskills, closer to the City, camps were established by Jewish cultural organizations, and their mission was to foster Jewish tradition and religion.

“Up here in the Adirondacks, though, they were very secular. At Camp Severance, for instance, the Sabbath service was called ‘Serious Hour.’ ”

BOND’S RESEARCH into Adirondack youth camps led her to an interesting conclusion.

“One of my theories is that Adirondack children’s camps created a lot of the constituency for the Adirondacks,” she said. “They came up here every summer as kids, and they keep coming back as adults.”

That theory, postulated by Bond three years ago, was borne out in the foreword to “Paradise,” written by Philip Terrie, an author best known for his 1994 “Forever Wild: A Cultural History of Wilderness in the Adirondacks” and “Contested Terrain: A New History of Nature and People in the Adirondacks,” published in 1999.

In that foreword, Terrie writes that it was his experience as a summer-camp counselor in the Adirondacks during his college years that “planted the seeds of both environmentalism and a passion for all things Adirondack” in him.