

SUMMER CAMPS ALONG THE COWPASTURE RIVER

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Editor's note: The following essay is the eighth in a five-year series on water resources stewardship in the Cowpasture River Watershed, sponsored by the Cowpasture River Preservation Association and published by The Recorder. The goal of the series is to create awareness among students, citizens and officials of the critical need to protect our surface and ground-water resources, and to stimulate interest in progressive stewardship.

Every spring, thousands of children throughout the United States haul their trunks and duffles out of the attic as they begin to dream and, prepare and pack for a week or more away from home at summer camp.



Camp Mont Shenandoah Summer Camp "Life Savers" on the Cowpasture River (1931)

The concept of the summer camp came to be in the latter half of the nineteenth century as our society began to react against the urbanization and industrialization of America. The goals of the early camps, which persist in most traditional camps today, were to allow children to spend time in nature to promote an overall well-being, impart values and develop the entire child – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Camp was the “desirable antidote to city life...” as children from urban areas had become prone to being “bored, listless and susceptible to unsavory influences” (See: Children's Nature) during the summer months. Camps were developed in rural areas, usually on a body of water, following a theme of “manufactured wilderness” where campers could take risks and learn about nature in a safe, rustic and well supervised, environment.

In the twentieth century, the number of camps proliferated throughout the country, primarily in New England and the Mid-Atlantic region and Bath County was no exception. Because the region offered many of the attributes found in a summer camp setting – a beautiful environment, pristine waters, ample flora and fauna – camps sprang up along the Cowpasture River.

Camp Alkulana – The oldest summer camp in the State of Virginia and one of the oldest in the country, Camp Alkulana is located on Lick Run, a tributary of the Cowpasture River, in Millboro Springs. Alkulana, an Indian word for “bright eyes”, was named as such when someone described the image of kerosene lanterns of the first cottage shining out into the woods at night. It was started in 1915 by Miss Nannie West for teenage girls who worked in the factories of Richmond. Miss West had been employed by the House of Happiness, a Baptists settlement house for girls and young women in the impoverished region of the city. She was an enthusiastic camping advocate and saw how an outdoor experience rejuvenated the girls physically, mentally and spiritually. Now a coed camp, the tradition of Alkulana is carried on by Beth Wright, the current director. As part of the Richmond Baptist Association, the camp’s mission is to “reveal God’s love to low-income and at-risk children ...so that they might realize the intrinsic value in themselves and others.” (See: Alkulana Website) A central component to achieving their mission is for the children to experience nature through outdoor activities which include swimming, spelunking, hiking and camping out. Due to poor health in 1924, Nannie West departed Alkulana but returned to her beloved Bath County when she started Camp Mont Shenandoah in 1927.

Camp Mont Shenandoah – Located on the Cowpasture River and also in Millboro Springs, Camp Mont Shenandoah is small, private camp for girls between the ages of seven and sixteen. The clientele differed from those of Camp Alkulana in that, while most of the campers were from the vicinity of Richmond, they were primarily from families with means. It is unknown why Miss West left the missionary work of serving disadvantaged girls to start a camp for girls of privilege but she brought with her the same values and ideals established at Camp Alkulana. In the late 20s and early 30s, the mission of the camp was “to develop Christian character and to give to its

girls a happy, wholesome vacation.... [where the] program will strengthen the soul as well as the mind and body. It develops...a love for God's great out-of-doors...the best avenue of approach to one's soul life." To this end, Miss West emphasized the use of the natural elements of the camp grounds with the river being the focal point of many activities. As described in a 1933 brochure, the camp is "A beautiful spot, where the river widens and the water gradually deepens [and] affords a delightful place for swimming and boating." (See: CMS 1933 Brochure) Today, the same basic tenets guide the program at Camp Mont Shenandoah with the river still providing a central focus for the girls' learning and recreation. It can be heard every summer, as each girl plunges into the cool, emerald green waters, "I love the river!"



Camp Mont Shenandoah Summer Camp Canoeists on the Cowpasture River (1950s)

Camp Wallawhatoola – Next door to Camp Mont Shenandoah was Camp Wallawhatoola, a private boys' camp that operated from 1922 through 1983. The word "wallawhatoola" is an Indian term for "winding river", an excellent representation of the Cowpasture River on which the camp sat (and a derivative of the actual name of the river, Walatoola, before it was changed to the Cowpasture). Dabney S. Lancaster and Stanley Sutton, the gentlemen behind the creation of the camp, met while both were working for Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (now fondly referred to as Virginia Tech), Lancaster as an agricultural education professor and

Sutton as the head football coach. Dabney owned the property on which the camp sat, where an old hotel and spa, also called Wallawhatoola, once belonged. The two men operated the camp together until 1927 when Dabney Lancaster sold the land to Sutton who remained the owner and director until his son, Don, assumed the operations in the mid-1960s. In a letter dated March 9, 1966, Stan Sutton wrote to his grandson, Don “Skeet” Sutton, about his first time seeing the property that would become Camp Wallawhatoola. In it he states, “As I crossed the suspension bridge I looked first up and down to a very beautiful blue, cold stream with the farm ford passing beneath the bridge.” (See: Camp Wallawhatoola Website) It was at this crossing that, each summer, the boys, campers and counselors, built a dam made of river stone to create a pool deep enough for swimming and boating. This arduous task is fondly recalled to this day at the annual Camp Wallawhatoola reunion as one of Uncle Don’s character building events!

Camp Nimrod for Boys and Girls – Frank Wood was born and raised in Bath County. He inherited from his parents, Lewis and Emma Wood, Nimrod Hall, a working inn that has been in existence since 1783. In 1933, Frank married Mae Murray. After having two daughters, Sarah and Frankie, Frank was looking for a way to supplement the income that Nimrod Hall provided. He loved children and the land. Coupling those two elements, he started Camp Nimrod for Boys on his property in 1935. Many activities were offered such as tennis, riflery, archery, land sports, horseback riding and, of course, swimming, canoeing and fishing in the Cowpasture River. In 1939, Mattie Wood Poyser, Frank’s sister, was given a portion of the land to start Camp Nimrod for Girls which, following a similar mission, offered many of the same activities as the boys camp. Both camps started with a small number of campers but were immediately successful and, at their height, had as many 135 children in each camp for eight weeks during the summer. An old Camp Nimrod for Boys brochure describes the camp as being located “in a most unusually picturesque beauty spot on the Cowpasture River, tributary to the lovely James. This camp lies in the foothills of the Alleghany mountains, bathed in gentle breeze, warming sunshine, with pleasantly cool nights.” (See: Camp Nimrod for Boys Brochure) Another brochure talks about the many happy hours the boys spend on the river. Both camps closed their doors in 1984, a few years after Frank’s death and as private camp popularity began to wane. Sarah Davis, Frank’s eldest daughter, fondly remembers her camping days, riding horses and swimming in the river. At the age of 16, she taught many of the children to ride. In 1965, she became the director of the girls’ camp and considers the many campers that came through the gates of Nimrod as her children. In recent years, Sarah has operated what has been called called Pony Camp at the old Nimrod for Girls site for two weeks each summer where horses were the primary focus but the girls still used the refreshing waters of the Cowpasture to cool off each afternoon. Wes Shrader, Sarah’s son, also ran Camp Poppy for boys for a number of years in the same location; he, too, relied on the river for much of the boy’s recreation.

Virginia Elks Youth Camp – The one agency associated camp along the Cowpasture is the Virginia Elks Youth Camp located off of Cowpasture River Highway (Route 42), about ten miles south of Millboro Springs. The camp opened its doors in 1950 as a place that provides a balance of freedom and supervision for the boys and girls that attend. They focus on an appreciation for the outdoors, learning in a safe environment and the “development of skills and knowledge that contribute to wholesome recreation in later years”. As with the other camps, the Cowpasture River plays a central role in daily activities at the Elks camp. On the camp’s website, the property is described as, “...one of the most beautiful mountain areas of Virginia, in the heart of the Alleghenies just north of Clifton Forge in Bath County, our camp location is described by the residents of the area as the ‘prettiest hundred or so acres on the Cowpasture River’. Nowhere is there to be found more majestic mountain ranges, more crystal clear mountain streams than those surrounding the Virginia Elks Youth Camp.” (See: Virginia Elks Youth Camp website)



Camp Mont Shenandoah Summer Campers Crossing the Cowpasture River on Horseback (1942)

Camp Old Dominion – Kent Ford, a native of the Allegheny Highlands, fondly recalls his days at Camp Old Dominion, a small boys’ camp once located almost a mile south of Peter’s Bridge off of the Cowpasture River Highway (on property that Kent’s father owned). Started in the 1920s, Major McGruer and his wife, Alice, ran the camp from its opening to 1947 when the Major was ready to retire, including from his military job in DC. The thirty boys that attended the camp for eight weeks each summer enjoyed a number of activities such as swimming and boating, fishing, softball, archery, riflery and tennis. According to Kent, the Cowpasture played an integral role in everyday camp life. The campers’ morning started at 7:00 with a daily, refreshing skinny dip. Following a morning softball game and before lunch, the boys took another quick swim. All of the boys wanted to fully enjoy the river and have the privilege of using the rope swing in the deeper pool of water, but they had to pass a swimming test first comprised of swimming to the opposite bank of the river and back. Over the years, the Major

had built a small fleet of boats for the boys to use, including sliding seat racing sculls and canvas kayaks. Because the camp was on the other side of the river from Rt. 42, one could only access it via boat or by driving through the riffles in a large vehicle. If there was a flood, there was no coming or going from the camp making it difficult to feed hungry boys and young men should they have been on short supply!

Camp Kannata – Another boys camp once located between Clifton Forge and Millboro Springs, Camp Kannata differed slightly from the other camps in that it had an academic component to its program along with the typical camp activities. Kannata was started by Captain Herbert D. Deane, a teacher and coach at Augusta Military Academy located in Fort Defiance, Virginia. Boys who attended Camp Kannata, most of whom attended Augusta Military Academy during the school year, did so either for college preparation or for remedial work in a subject in which they were “deficient”. The academics were coupled along with the opportunity of participating in outdoor activities. After a morning of class, boys had the chance to swim, canoe, hike and ride. The camp boasted five miles of river frontage along the Cowpasture which included “some of the best bass and pike fishing in Virginia....and a regularly equipped ‘big hole’ for swimming...” A 1934 camp brochure states, “Our river is absolutely unpolluted”. (See: Camp Kannata 1934 Brochure) At some point in its history, Camp Kannata moved to a location off of Rt. 625, north of Millboro Springs, but remained on the Cowpasture River. Camp Kannata operated until sometime in the late 1950s.

Camp River’s Bend – For the first time in 65 years, a new camp will come into existence along the banks of the Cowpasture River this summer. Camp River’s Bend plans to open its doors to a hundred boys offering activities such as swimming, canoeing and fishing on the river as well as archery, riflery, baseball and other land sports. The concept of the camp, started by Matthew Richardson and Charlie Williams with the strong support of many, came into being once the owners of Camp Virginia, a private, boys’ camp in Goshen, decided to close their doors this winter. Serendipitously, forces came together to create the camp in a very short period of time. Located on what’s known as Nimbacova, a property located close to Nimrod Hall, the camp boasts over a mile of river frontage from which the camp’s name is derived and will be a focal point of camp life.

Summer Camp Revival – Interestingly, there has been renewed interest in summer camps in recent years as technology comes to play a bigger role in the lives of young people. Like their predecessors at the turn of the twentieth century, modern day parents want to see their children have greater exposure to the grand outdoors as computers, electronic games, cell phones and iPods consume their lives often keeping them indoors.

Much of the beauty, understanding of nature and recreational value of our local summer camps comes from the Cowpasture River itself. Without the river, its flora and fauna and fishes, the natural camp experience would be lost. Anyone can swim in a chlorinated pool, but the chance to slip into the crystal-clear green waters of the Cowpasture River is a privilege that we should not overlook or take for granted. Clean and clear river water is a must for us and our future generations.

“I have a conviction that a few weeks spent in a well-organized summer camp may be of more value educationally than a whole year of formal school work.” Charles William Eliot, President of Harvard University, 1869-1909

Follow-up Research Sources:

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- (2) VanSlyck, Abigail A., *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- (3) Camp Alkulana Website: www.alkulana.org.
- (4) Camp Mont Shenandoah Website: <http://www.campmontshenandoah.com/>
- (5) Camp River's Bend Website: www.campriversbend.org.
- (6) Camp Wallawhatoola Website: www.wallawhatoola.org.
- (7) Nimrod Hall Website: www.nimrodhall.com.
- (8) Virginia Elks Youth Camp Website: www.virginiaelks.org/info/SummerCamp.