

CAMPGROUND MEMORIES OF PHILLIP H SMITH

The article by Glenn Fish concentrated on the history of the Riverside Campground. Following are some of my memories of campground activities. I grew up in the home immediately south of the Riverside church overlooking the Hudson River and the road to the campground. This was the late 1920s to the 1940s and have been a frequent visitor to the area since that time.

My first recollection of the campground was that my father was caretaker and also delivered milk to some of the cottage owners, filled their ice box, and other odd jobs while my mother cleaned the cottages for some of the owners prior to their arrival in the spring and did laundry for many of them during the summer. I would ride along with my father in his old Model T truck and accept the sugar cookies offered, especially by Mrs. VanAlstyne who had a cottage on the circle by the river.

My father, Gilbert E Smith, was between jobs around 1929-30 therefore he did the work for the association. George VanGuilder and his boys took over this task for a number of years. The directors of the Riverside Campground Association contracted with a local person to act as caretaker. This included many tasks, i.e.. keeping the grounds mowed, filling the ice house during the winter, shoveling snow off of the Institute buildings to prevent cave-ins, hauling trash to the dump, plus doing many home repair jobs for the cottage owners at their request and expense..

The cottage owners joined the association which entitled them to the trash pick up and keeping the area mowed and raked, any other work performed for a cottage owner was paid for by the owner. Trash collection was a problem in that the raccoons delighted in feeding from the trash containers and scattering debris about the area. This problem was eventually resolved by building storage boxes or chaining the can covers down so the coons could not open them.

There were eight or nine buildings, which were maintained by the association. Some of these were the boarding house/dining hall, girls dormitory, two boys dorms and a latrine located in the woods east of the ball field, the preacher's cottage, tabernacle, canteen and icehouse. There were a number of small dorm rooms over the dining hall. All of these buildings were definite firetraps however fortunately, to the best of my knowledge, there never was a fire in any of these buildings.

The cottages were, for the most part, of simple frame construction and left unfinished on the inside. Many were story and a half high with two or more sleeping rooms upstairs divided by curtains or half-high partitions. Many had a screened porch down stairs and a few had one upstairs also. A few also had a beautiful stone fireplace, which was used to knock off the chill on a cool morning or evening. The buildings were mounted on rock piling foundation. There is no shortage of rocks along the upper Hudson River. There were approximately forty cottages on the campground and about eight or nine at

Brovanna. The original cottages around the circle were built very close together, some no more than two feet apart. This contributed to the loss of many along the river in the fire of 1924.

A series of articles were published in the North Creek News in the spring of 1941 titled "Reminiscence of Clarence Ross" by Eda Russell. Clarence lived in the Wevertown area from approximately 1865 to the time of his death. The articles depict his experiences during those years, one of which describes a situation which allegedly took place on the campground at Riverside during a summer campmeeting as follows:

"A great many people had cottages on the camp ground. As the meeting lasted a week, many people came prepared to stay the entire week but preferred not to live in the tents and so bought a small parcel of ground, and built a very small cottage on it. The foundations were just large stones placed on each corner for the building to rest on. There was just enough protection to keep off the ground and under a roof. They were very frail structures indeed. I've often wondered what ever kept them from being blown into the river by March winds.

There was another phase in this picture as there always is at any public gathering, the good and the bad elements. In this case it was a group of boys, young men in fact, who were nevertheless very conspicuous at the meeting. They were mischievous, malicious, trouble making young people, and genuine rough scuffs.

One man, who had a cottage, conducted a tonsorial parlor of sorts in it. It was a one room building and shook when anyone walked about inside. He did a good business though. The only furnishings were the barber chair in the center of the room and a shelf on the wall which held his accessories and equipment.

One day during the meeting one of these young men- a big devil-may-care individual- thought it would be fun to play a practical joke on the barber and, upon expressing his ideas, was egged on by the rest of the gang. He waited until the time was right, then he crept up to the side of the building where the shelf was and gave it a most viscous thump with his fist. Down came mugs, soap, lotion, styptic pencil and everything off the shelf and all over the room. The barber was so amazed at the racket that he was speechless. It was as if a cannon ball had crashed through the side of the building. When he regained his senses sufficiently he went outside but there was no one there. He knew, of course, that someone had done it deliberately and instantly mistrusted the gang of hoodlums.

He sounded the alarm immediately and many participated in the "round-up". The culprit who had done the damage, however, had reached the river, swum across and escaped before it could be determined who had committed the misdemeanor."

Many of the local women worked in the boarding house during the Institute week or other such activities, cooking, cleaning, etc.. My mother, Hazel Smith, her sister Grace Harrington, Ella Moffit, Mrs. VanGuilder and others were hired. As stated before my mother also worked for the individual cottage owners at their request.

There was an old road leading from the campground, exiting a short distance inside the gate, through the woods, intersecting Rt. 8 about one half mile from the bridge. This was a short cut for those people arriving from Loon Lake direction with their horse and wagon in bygone years. The icehouse was located just off of the grounds on this road. Donald Mundy and the VanGuilders cut ice on Loon Lake and filled this icehouse with a few hundred cakes of ice, which was then sold to the cottage owners and used in the boarding house. [The North Creek News of 12 Feb 1947 relates that Donald Mundy and his crew were harvesting ice on Loon Lake and filling the Riverside Campground ice houses and other icehouses in the vicinity.] The caretaker would dig the ice out of the sawdust, take it to the pump by the boarding house or down by the river, clean it off and deliver it to the cottages. There was a spot a short distance below the last cottage where a truck could be backed up to the edge of the river. This was a convenient location for cleaning the ice which was a good job on a hot day. The road from the grounds to Rt 8 is totally grown over now and never was used during the time I remember.

Six or eight cottages were built about a half mile south of the campground in an area called Brovana, supposedly the name is based on the names of some of the owners, Brown, VanValkenberg, etc.. I don't know just what the reason was for this subdivision however it existed long before my time. It was reported in the Warrensburgh News of May 1901 that Dr Hagar was building a new cottage. This may have been his cottage at Brovanna. Esther Hagar and Mrs. Van Valkenberg had the first two cottages at the top of the hill in the 1930s. The others were a short distance further south. Southworths occupied the Van Valkenberg cottage after the death of Mr. V. Esther Hagar was a schoolteacher in White Plains, NY and came up each summer.

There was one occupant at Brovana who had a little workshop near the Brovanna icehouse and made model ships in his spare time. I enjoyed visiting this place when in the area. There was a wagon shed turned into a garage at the entrance to the last four or five cottages.

Electricity did not reach Brovana until 1956 however it was extended to the campground prior to 1930. I believe electricity was available in Riverside around 1925, but may be wrong on that.

The cottage owners on the campground whom I can recall were: George Russ, Schenectady; Sheridan Hammond, Glens Falls; Arthur Landmesser, Rensselaer; W H Wersson, Saratoga Springs; Ben Wassel, Schenectady; Brown; Bull; Allen F Bain, Balston Spa; VanAlstine; Edwin Schultis; Grace McKnight, Schenectady; Leon B Randall, Syracuse; L E Barker, Rensselaer; Radcliff Taylor, Cohoes; Redfern, Schylerville; George Appleby, Rotterdam; Fred Rudebush; C M Sturgess, Bennington; Cassius Miller, Albany; Lennon; Milo Barnard, Bloomingdale; Mrs. Jesse Lawrence, Amsterdam; Delorme; Irving Angell, Walter Angell, Mrs. A D Angell; Wesley Bishop, Syracuse; Dorothy Bishop, Long Island; Boorne, Schenectady; Bingham; VanValkenberg, Long Island; Esther Hagar, White Plains; Irving Southworth, Williston, L.I.; Ned Nichols, Albany; Arthur Bishop; Eleanor Gay, Bronxville; Dorothy Monazzi;

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Harold Griffith, Troy; Cassius J Miller, Albany; Dorr; W H Warren; William and Edward Moore, Amsterdam; Effie Price and a few others. Many of the cottages were owned by Methodist ministers however the number of ministers has declined rapidly. There are a few descendants who still come to the campground but not many, i.e.. Donald Bain, Bishops, Ralph Curtis, Delorme, etc..

The road to the campground was dirt until 1973 when it was paved by the Town of Chester. This was no real problem except for the dust in the summer and some mud in the spring. Some of the cottage owners spread oil on the road in front of their cottage to keep the dust down. When the ice went out of the river in the spring it was not unusual for it to block the road and a bulldozer would have to be called on to clear the huge chunks of ice from the roadway. This didn't happen very often.

A few hardy souls remained in their cottage for the winter. I can recall about four, Walter Angel, son of Mrs. Albert Angel stayed one winter in the late 30s rebuilding a pump organ. He was an organ builder by trade. Mr. and Mrs. Hammond lived in the green cottage just below the footbridge, they winterized their home and stayed there three or four winters in the late 30s. Mrs Hammond drove a Buick touring car. Mrs. Lawrence and her daughter and family remained in their cottage one winter, about 1939. The boys were Bill and Ned Moore who attended school in Pottersville and walked up to the bridge to catch the bus, a cold walk when the wind was out of the north and the temperature down in the teens. The Lawrence cottage was on the north end of the circle. It was moved just outside the gate in Oct 1939. It burned in Sept 1945 and was rebuilt. Walter and Mary Freebern lived in the Bull cottage from 1933 to 1936 before moving to North River. The Bull cottage was the first cottage on the right south of the gateposts.

One unique cottage was Mrs. McKnight's which sat next to Mrs. Lawrence, and was called the "Doll Cottage" because it appeared to be so small, however it was adequate.

There was a good-sized softball field and a nice tennis court across the road from the boarding house. The canteen, which was the former gatehouse, sat next to the tennis court for many years and was open during Institute and sometimes on weekends throughout the summer. The canteen was operated by one or two of the boys from the campground. Ned Moore managed it one or two seasons. Institute faculty and young people played many ball games during the summer.

The people on the campground were very supportive of the local church, attending social functions and church suppers. The local church would basically close during the summer and everyone would attend services in the Tabernacle. I recall walking to the Tabernacle on Sunday mornings during the summer to attend the services. We had a path from our house down across the field to the campground road. It was then a pleasant walk in the shade of the many oak trees along the road to the tabernacle. Among the friends we might meet along the way would be Bessie Raymond, the Russ family, the Landmessers family, the Wersons, Wassells, and many others. Attending services in the Tabernacle was quite different in that it was out of doors with a roof over head, a platform for the speaker and piano, wooden benches to sit on. One's mind could easily wander as the squirrels

scampered in the rafters, the birds sang in the trees, and one could hear the water rushing over the rocks in the Hudson a few yards to the east. Some of the people, who had a cottage on the circle, would sit on their porch and listen to the sermon. Those who did not attend were usually quiet and did not disturb the service. The benches were stacked on the platform in the winter. The piano was often taken to our home because my mother and sister played and this provided better protection for it. My father had a Model A Ford pickup on which the upright piano was precariously perched for the short trip. In the spring, straw was spread over the Tabernacle dirt floor, and the benches put in place for the summer. The local boys and girls took part in the Epworth League Institute each summer, Louise and Ruth Mundy, Phyllis and I, the Richard's children and others. I had one problem with this as I got older because it interfered with my helping my uncle with his haying.

As I got older I did many odd jobs for the cottage owners, i.e., carry their mail from the post office, pick up a gallon of kerosene from Mundy's for their stove or lamp, ride my bicycle to Chester to the drug store, rake, etc.. The pay certainly wasn't great but it created some spending money.

The concrete sidewalk from the campground to the bridge was in pretty bad shape even in the late 30s due to the ice pushing up on it and the frost causing it to heave and break but it was fun to ride a bicycle pel mel down to the campground, dodging the breaks in the walkway. The biggest problem along the sidewalk was the poison ivy and still is today. Many of us managed to get a good case of this at least once during the summer.

I knew many of the boys and girls as they spent the summer in their parent's cottage. Ned Moore, Donald Bain and his sister Barbara, Ruth Landmesser, Betty Werson, Sonny Lennon, and many others. We all participated in the Institute program, climbed campground mountain innumerable times, often running down the front path at a break neck speed. Ned and I often went camping, bicycle riding and fishing together.

The campground lies between Campground (Carpenter) mountain and the Hudson River. The mountain is not very high and easy to climb, especially if one takes the trail which departs from the road between the Campground and Brovanna. This trail has a couple steep pitches but is much easier to climb than the trail up the front which departs from behind the first cottage below the ballfield. This trail is very steep. The fire of 1915, which started across the river at The Riverside Distributing Co., completely destroyed the trees on the west side of the mountain down to within a few hundred yards of the cottages.. Therefor as late as 1950 one had a lovely view from the ledges at the top of the mountain. Loon Lake was visible to the east as were the many farms lying in that direction and north into Igera. Porters farm to the west across Dipper Pond Mountain, Savages and Harringtons to the south were within viewing distance also. The boarding house and many cottages on the grounds were visible, as was our house. Some years there would also be a good crop of blueberries among the ledges.

Life in general on the campground was quite serene, however there were frequently a few boisterous young individuals who broke the quiet solitude of the area with their high jinx.

There was always some kind of a swimming hole in the river where the young people spent many hours escaping the heat of a hot summer day.

Ben Wassel was known for his wit. He kept things lively on the campground and was a mover in the day to day operations of the Institute and Campground Association.

The people walked over to Williams's store, the Post Office or railroad station frequently, enjoying the fresh air and friendly atmosphere that always prevailed in Riverside. There was no sidewalk on the bridge at that time which made the walk a little dangerous, especially around train time and the traffic was heavy.

When I was about fifteen or sixteen I took on the task of shoveling the snow off of many of the cottages and the Institute buildings. Maurice Fish, a high school classmate from Igerna, worked with me on weekends through the winter and we made a little money for our hard work.

My great grandfather, Willard C Smith who lived in Horicon, owned lot 159 on the campground in 1888, however I have no idea what ever became of it. I believe it was located just south of the tabernacle. My great grandfather allegedly was one of the people who helped clear the trees with Aaron Hall in 1873.

March 17, 1971 the tabernacle and dining hall collapsed as a result of heavy snow. They were rebuilt but on a smaller scale. I do not know if this is the collapse, which Glenn Fish refers to, or if there had been a similar situation many years earlier. I believe the partial collapse of the tabernacle he refers to happened much earlier and the top portion of the roof was redesigned.

Glenn Fish, who married Dorothy Bishop, retired from a firm in New York City and built a nice home in 1966 on the left as you go down the campground road from the bridge. He became active in the Campground Association, the local church, as well as many local activities, ie., the fire department, mountain climbing, etc..

My father, Gilbert E Smith, was the caretaker for the Association from about 1963 until 1977. He transferred the job to Paul Little who continues with the many tasks required to support activities on the campground.