

CELEBRATING



Do you love bug juice, ghost stories, toasted marshmallows and Color Wars? Then thank the Granite State, home to America's first sleepaway camp.

By Darren Garnick

Camp Tecumseh Lodge in the early 1900s. Founded in 1903 by three Olympic athletes from the University of Pennsylvania, Tecumseh is still open today.



New Hampshire is best known as the first-in-the-nation state for the presidential primaries, but it is also the birthplace of America's first overnight summer camp. In 1881, Dartmouth College dropout Ernest Balch bought Squam Lake's Chocorua Island and created Camp Chocorua — aimed at the children of wealthy tourists visiting the White Mountains. His goal was to prevent as many rich kids as possible from becoming spoiled brats.

A recent exhibit at the Museum of the White Mountains at Plymouth State University put it this way: "Rather than let the self-indulgence of high society erode the character of these youth, Balch envisioned a different kind of resort; one where boys could find challenge, not champagne, canoes instead of crystal chandeliers, and an earthen bed instead of fine linen. He wanted the boys to learn self-governance, the value of money, and a strong work ethic while experiencing adventures like those portrayed in dime novels."

Camp Chocorua lasted only nine years. It lacked the water and sewage treatment infrastructure to support its surging enrollment. However, this failed camp inspired a movement. According to the Museum of the White Mountains, there have been more than 450 overnight camps on New Hampshire soil since Chocorua went belly-up. Several of the earliest pioneers — such as Camp Pasquaney (1895), Camp Hale (1900),

Camp Mowglis (1903), Camp Tecumseh (1903) and Camp Pemigewassett (1908) — are still going strong.

Although there are still some elite programs that require taking out a second mortgage, sleepaway camps are no longer exclusively for rich kids. Boy Scout and Girl Scout camps, YMCA camps, charity-sponsored camps and religious camps — not to mention scholarship funds — have made this rite of passage a more universal experience.

If anthropologists want to study what American childhood was like before the scourge of mobile phones, this is where you can still go to observe kids in the wild. For many boys and girls, camp is a magical paradise to try new things — mountain biking, water skiing, horseback riding, ceramics, drama, etc. — and make new friends. It's a place for pillow fights, "Mad Libs," campfire sing-alongs, hokey skits, bunk pranks and, sometimes, a first kiss.

For others, it's a sadistic punishment where you're forced to make your bed and share a bathroom (or God forbid, an outhouse) with a few dozen strangers. It's also where grown-ups will nag you daily to bathe in bug repellent, but the mosquitoes will still get you. Oh yes, they will get you.

Whether you look back at summer camp as a blessing or a curse, we're betting that your bunk-bed days had a tremendous influence on who you became as an adult. To prove that theory, we asked alumni from five New Hampshire summer camps to share their most vivid memories (with this author providing a bonus sixth flashback).

There's academic evidence suggesting

that summer camps instill independence and self-confidence in kids, and teach them teamwork and responsibility. However, those are intangible benefits usually not recognized until years later. So what do campers care about in real time?

Check out this 2015 letter home from Amherst's Lauren Bentley-Melle, who defiantly boasts about eating a Snickers bar every night at Camp Calumet and creating Coke-and-Mentos explosions in her cheeks. Lauren's mother Andrea, who works as the camp's nurse, shares her own Calumet memories on page 45.

Cavity risks aside, Lauren's note is a reminder that summer camps are also responsible for preserving the art of handwritten letters. To parents' delight, many camps force kids to write home at least once a week.





David Concannon
Deep Sea Explorer
Camp Mowglis (1977-1979)
Hebron

Sunken Treasure

Adventurer David Concannon, who has explored some of the world's most famous shipwrecks, recalls his first underwater discovery in Newfound Lake.

There's a tradition at Camp Mowglis — named after the boy in Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book" — that involves swimming from the waterfront to Waingunga Rock, a submerged rock marked with a buoy to warn boaters to steer clear.

Camper David Concannon thought it would be fun to look at the rock with a diving mask and snorkel. During his swim, he stumbled across the wooden ribs of a small boat (about the size of an SUV). It had an old rusty engine and was mostly covered with mud and leaves.

Concannon accidentally discovered the remnants of a mailboat that crashed on Waingunga Rock in 1912. At that time, there were fewer roads in rural New Hampshire and it was sometimes more efficient to deliver mail by horseback and/or by boat.

"It wasn't anything gigantic, but I was fascinated by it," Concannon recalls. "It was a piece of history, and even though I later learned that some old-timers knew about it, my friends and I didn't know this wreck existed."



Dave Concannon



Titanic explorer Dave Concannon first pushed his limits at Camp Mowglis. In the 1979 "Howl" yearbook, he's shown hiking the ridge between Mt. Lincoln and Mt. Lafayette, and hanging out with his bunkmates in front of the Mowglis Den.

Concannon now is a lawyer and business/operational consultant for professional high-risk expeditions, including six to the RMS Titanic and two to Mt. Everest. But he doesn't just handle paperwork. He's organized and led deep submersible dives to the Titanic wreck and searched 180 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean floor to recover the Apollo F-1 rocket engines that launched the first astronauts to the moon.

"I first learned how to snorkel and scuba dive at camp, and I now represent almost all of the scuba diving equipment manufacturers in the United States," Concannon says.

"There's definitely a direct line between that 20-foot mailboat dive and exploring the Titanic 2.5 miles under the sea.

"I was a scholarship kid raised by a single mother and we didn't have a lot growing up. I'm still heavily involved with Camp Mowglis because I firmly believe camp made me who I am today. I want other kids to have the same opportunity," he adds. "Camp taught me what I was capable of — and it was so much more than I thought. I learned how to handle myself. I learned how to tough it out sometimes. I learned how to get along with people."



Andrea Bentley-Melle, Nurse
Camp Calumet (1984-1988)
Freedom

Homesickness Is a Rare Diagnosis

Camp Calumet nurse Andrea Bentley-Melle used to stay as far away from the infirmary as possible.

It's not often that one reminisces about brushing her teeth more than 30 years ago. But Andrea Bentley-Melle can still feel the euphoria from her first night at Camp Calumet.

"I remember going to the bathhouse after we had a campfire. I was standing at the sink and thinking, 'I love this place. I love it already. We haven't even had a whole day here and I love how it feels. I love being outside. I

love being with other kids.' I was hooked.

"I couldn't understand when another camper was homesick. Because I thought, they feed us, we get to play, we do all these fun activities. What more could you want?" she recalls. "And even though it was a Lutheran camp, the faith element wasn't boring. It wasn't crammed down our throats or made to feel formal and serious like church. You just felt God's presence all around you — in the sky, in the pine needles, everywhere."

Bentley-Melle confesses avoiding the camp health center if she had a headache because her "biggest fear was that they were going to tell me I was sick and had to go home." Ironically, she became the Camp Calumet nurse in 2010, and now encounters kids with the same fear. "I've had kids with a fever cry and tell me they wait all year for this. They don't want to go home."

Homesickness is more rare today, she says, because counselors are better trained to recognize and address it. Bentley-Melle's daughters Lauren, 12, and Rowen, 16, have attended Calumet the past few years, but have communicated by snail mail to maintain the same brushing-your-teeth feeling of independence their mother first experienced in 1984.



Andrea Bentley-Melle with her family at Camp Calumet

"Both girls love it," says Bentley-Melle, who is also a nurse at the Mountain View Middle School in Goffstown. "And I love that they're packing their own clothes for the week and being responsible for taking care of themselves. I might only see them in camp two or three times the entire time. Otherwise, we are only in touch through writing letters."



Future nurse Andrea Bentley-Melle loved the idea of a Lutheran camp that didn't feel like church. "You just felt God's presence in the sky, in the pine needles, everywhere," she says.



Eugene Mirman, Comedian
Ilya Mirman, Marketing Exec
Camp Tohkomeupog
(1982-1983), East Madison

First Pranks

For the Moscow-born Mirman brothers, Camp Tohkomeupog was a crash course in American culture.

Three decades before the Era of Fake News, new Russian immigrants Eugene and Ilya Mirman learned not to believe everything they heard — just like in their old country.

Eugene was only 8 years old, the prime age for gullibility, when Camp Tohkomeupog counselors came up with an elaborate hoax to convince the youngest campers there was a total solar eclipse. While their campers were sleeping, the counselors stealthily set all the kids' watches five hours ahead.

"It was pretty impressive," recalls Eugene. "They had reveille with the bugles to wake everybody up — and we all lined up like we usually did. It's really 2 a.m., but we all think it's 7 a.m. They tell us there's an eclipse and that's why it's dark (presumably the ruse worked because the moon wasn't visible). Then they said we could either continue our day or as a special treat, we could go back to sleep."

"Then in the morning, we saw the kids in the other age groups and our group was like, 'Oh my God, did you see the eclipse?' and we bragged that we got to sleep late. And they said, 'What are you talking about? It's 8 o'clock in the morning!'"

Older brother Ilya, then 13, faced counselor hoaxsters of his own. His bunk was told that it was a Tohkomeupog tradition for kids to walk barefoot on hot coals at the first campfire of the season. To allegedly protect themselves from burns, the campers were urged to rub a generous helping of toothpaste on their feet and put their socks back on. Needless to say, there was no firewalk



Ilya



Eugene

Ilya and Eugene Mirman at Camp Tohkomeupog in the early '80s. Born in Russia, the brothers fondly recall their NH campmates as being "less mean" than Massachusetts kids.

and Ilya wisely kept his toes Colgate-free.

"These were harmless pranks where everyone was borderline humiliated equally," he says, noting that back home in Lexington, Massachusetts, their classmates would inexplicably blame them ("the Commies") for every Cold War crisis.

"Kids in New Hampshire were definitely less mean," agrees Eugene. "Camp was like a slightly gentler America for us."

Eugene is now a standup comedian best known for voicing Gene Belcher on the animated FOX sitcom "Bob's Burgers." Ilya is vice president of marketing at Desktop Metal, a hot startup specializing in 3D metal printing.

Pranks aside, Ilya says he credits Tohkomeupog for helping him better acclimate to American culture.

"I went to my first dance and they played 'Stairway to Heaven' as the last song. There was an awesome capture-the-flag game spread across acres and acres. I loved sneaking around the woods and fields," he says. "I definitely gained a new level of comfort just interacting with people."

"Before I got to camp, the only music I really liked were these two Russian bards, Vladimir Vysotsky and Bulat Okudzhava," Ilya adds. "My bunk exposed me to rock music — Peter Gabriel, The Doors, The Who, the Grateful Dead — and I still remember which kids would play which cassettes. Some of the counselors would play these songs on guitar around the campfire. This had a huge influence on me."

No word if any of the American kids were smitten by the Russian bards.



Chris Sununu
New Hampshire Governor
Camp Fatima (1984-1989)
Gilmanton Iron Works

Hardcore Hiker

New Hampshire governor Chris Sununu says he first learned to carry his weight at Camp Fatima.

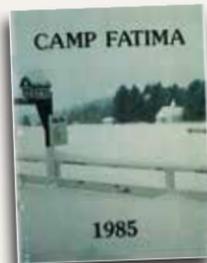
In 1998, future New Hampshire governor Chris Sununu buckled down for five months to hike from Maine to Georgia. But his first steps of conquering the Appalachian Trail actually happened more than a decade earlier, when he trekked up Mount Major and Blueberry Mountain with his friends at Camp Fatima.

"My love for hiking really started there," Sununu says. "Camp is all about exploring places you've never been able to explore. Those were the first times I could go out and not just hike for an hour or two, but for four, five or six hours and really spend a whole day out on the trail."

"Being on a mountain is an exhilarating feeling, but it makes you realize rather quickly that you have to be responsible for yourself. You have certain obligations, like carrying your own food and gear. But you also have to think of the safety of those around you," he says.

Sununu laughs when he looks at pictures of himself in the Camp Fatima yearbooks, which at the time showed the boys posing with random sports equipment. "That's a \$6 regular boy's haircut from downtown Salem right there," he says. "And this is when I went through my phase of spiking my hair a little bit."

Maybe to impress one of the girls at the Catholic camp's sister institution, Camp Bernadette, which would occasionally participate in dances and other joint activities. "It was always exciting to see them after you were with just guys for a couple



Gov. Chris Sununu in 1998 on his five-month Appalachian Trail hike and his Camp Fatima yearbook photo, which reveals his slightly spiked hair phase.

of weeks," he notes.

When the current governor was a camper, his father, John H. Sununu, was the state's governor. Did that distinction ever earn him any special treatment — positive or negative — from the other kids? "It would come up from time to time, but I don't think they treated me any differently. I didn't act any differently, so they didn't treat me any differently. I was just Chris from Cabin 10," he says.

But like most other kids, Sununu cherished the freedom of not answering to his

parents 24/7. It's a gift he plans to give to his own children, two of which will be attending New Hampshire camps this summer.

"You learn very quickly to rely on your counselors and rely on your peers. You go from being a bunch of strangers to being a team. Camp helps you develop great communication and leadership skills," Sununu says. "You also learn to work out your differences and problems with other kids, and at the end of the day, you're still friends. You make bonds that last a lifetime."



Jon Lubin, Lawyer
Shuli Lubin, Summer
Camp Administrator
Camp Birchmont (2005)
Wolfeboro

Summer Romance

Camp counselors Jon and Shuli Lubin never expected to find love on Lake Wentworth.

While he was a camper for four seasons (1995-1998), Jon Lubin “always wanted to see what was behind the curtain.

“This certainly isn’t unique to Camp Birchmont, but when you’re a camper, you look up to your counselors as role models and they seem so cool to you. You wonder where they disappear to on their days off, what they do on their nights out,” he recalls.

Lubin fulfilled his goal, becoming a counselor and soccer specialist for two years before he disappeared to college. The summer of 2005, sandwiched between graduation and his entry to law school, presented the opportunity for one last hurrah.

“I was 22 years old. My goals for returning to camp that summer were reuniting with old friends, making some new ones, and drinking every pint on the menu at Wolfe’s Tavern to earn my own pewter mug on that famous ceiling there,” Lubin says. “Birchmont gives staff members a lot of time off, which I think is healthy to recharge and refresh from what can be tiring days herding kids around.”

During those nights out, he quickly felt a connection with Shuli, the group leader for the 10-year-old girls’ cabins. “Sitting together on the camp bus turned into strolling down the streets of Portsmouth and Boston holding hands and eventually sharing our first kiss on the bus back to Wolfeboro,” reminisces Lubin.

“It was a crazy situation,” says Shuli Lubin, who previously worked at Birchmont’s sister camp, Pierce Country Day Camp on Long Island. “By the end of the summer, I knew this was the man I was going to marry. I didn’t go to camp to meet my husband, but



Top: Jon and Shuli Lubin got engaged at Lake Wentworth. Above left: Shuli was the leader of the 10-year-old girls group. Right: The Lubins’ daughters Charlotte and Brooke

it’s fitting that we met there because camp has been such a huge part of my life.”

The Lubins later got engaged under fireworks on the lake and married in 2009. Jon is a corporate lawyer for a private equity firm in Manhattan. Shuli is a camp office administrator for Pierce. Their daughters Brooke, 5, and Charlotte, 3, are destined in a few years to continue the family tradition in New Hampshire.

Lubin jokes that he almost sabotaged the fairy tale ending with a “Braveheart-like speech” at Birchmont’s farewell campfire

in 2005. “I knew in my gut that this would be my last summer there for a while and possibly forever, so I wanted to go out with a bang. In a terrible Scottish accent, I urged the whole camp to rise up and resist the tyranny of the coach buses coming to take us all home the next day,” he remembers. “Fortunately, this didn’t give Shuli any second thoughts about our relationship.”

For the record, Lubin never did earn that pewter mug from Wolfe’s Tavern, but with two future campers on the way, there’s plenty of time to finish.

Sink-or-Swim Lessons at Boy Scout Camp

Camp Wah-Tut-Ca taught me how to turn wet jeans into a life preserver.

By Darren Garnick



We both knew we were supposed to be Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean and Reverent. And we both knew that this Boy Scout Law did not contain any loopholes allowing knuckle sandwiches. But our tempers got the best of us. Damon (not his real name) and I wanted to fight and nobody was going to stop us.

Surprisingly, the authorities did the opposite of stopping us. Camp Wah-Tut-Ca was going to have its first officially sanctioned boxing match of 1980. Neither our scoutmaster nor any other real adults were around, so some of the counselors decided to turn our campsite into Madison Square Garden. “You guys wanna fight? Well, you’ll do it safely,” they said, drawing a large square in the dirt with a stick.

I vaguely recall a few rules such as no punches in the face, but otherwise it was a free-for-all brawl with all the other kids watching. After about 10 minutes of wild swinging nonsense, I was out of breath. He was panting too. “It’s not much fun anymore, is it?” one of the counselors rhetorically asked. Although that zen moment failed to permanently turn me into Gandhi, I never got in another fight during my two summers at Boy Scout camp (a distinction that was sadly never recognized with a badge or certificate).

Located in Northwood, NH (about 30 miles northeast of Manchester), Wah-Tut-Ca felt like the deep wilderness to me. Reinforcing the image were the musty US Army surplus tents mounted on wooden platforms and the fact that we needed to sleep entombed in mosquito netting propped up by sticks.

It’s not what my parents signed up for, but Wah-Tut-Ca was also the place where my younger brother Kevin and I first learned dirty jokes and experienced the joy of playing profanity-laced “Mad Libs.”

As for what my parents did sign up for, I remember being mesmerized by “gimp” plastic lacing, which I tirelessly stitched in the box and butterfly patterns with no end project in mind. I also took a liking to riflery, earning the coveted Silver Bullet award at the .22 shooting range. And I loved lighting campfires without any matches, using my cute little flint-and-steel set from the camp gift shop — just like my ancestors presumably did.



Boxing fans at Camp Wah-Tut-Ca. Writer Darren Garnick is the second to last scout in the second row.

In water safety class, we jumped into Northwood Lake with our clothes on and learned how to quickly turn our jeans into a life preserver. You kick off your sneakers, strip off your pants, tie each leg into a knot, don’t forget to keep treading water, whip the pants over your head to trap air inside, and hold the waist closed. And presto! You have a denim flotation vest. I have never used this skill once in the 38 years since I’ve learned it. However, if I ever go on a cruise, you won’t catch me wearing shorts or leather pants. You just never know when you might have to spring into action.

At age 12, I was not motivated by awards. The one exception was the Mile Swim badge, which seemed pretty badass despite the cutesy seahorse. Swimming across the lake and back with my own rowboat escort made me feel like I was crossing the English Channel. This was huge for my self-confidence, marking the first time I took on

an extreme challenge — and I crushed it. Looking back, there’s a direct line between my Northwood Lake swim and future life adventures, most notably a college Outward Bound wilderness course that involved five weeks of dogsledding in Minnesota and five weeks of canoeing the Rio Grande.

Three decades later, I vicariously relived my Wah-Tut-Ca experience through my then-8-year-old Cub Scout, Ari, at Camp Carpenter in Manchester. The camp runs an “Akela” program that lets parents (mothers too) share a week with their sons — on top of the week they already spend with their Cub packs.

On my first night, Camp Carpenter had me at hello. Boys who were strangers minutes earlier were running around the woods playing flashlight tag. Unfortunately, spontaneous games like these rarely happen in neighborhoods anymore. It now requires

a forced laboratory setting like summer camp.

At “Pirate’s Cove,” a waterfront fort on Long Pond, the kids are given eye patches and wage a water war with each other and counselors in paddle boats. Astoundingly, there’s also an official rock-throwing station where kids throw buckets of stones at pots and pans dangling from a clothesline.

I guess there used to be a rock-throwing problem at Camp Carpenter, but they shrewdly channeled the negative behavior into a quaint carnival attraction.

After he outgrew Cub Scout camp, Ari went to another overnight camp in Massachusetts that he vehemently hated. He felt like he didn’t fit in with the kids in his bunk, which can easily sour everything else. “This wasn’t a wasted experience,” I told him. “When you go to college, you might not like your randomly assigned roommate — or he might not like you. In the workplace, you won’t always like everyone at your company. The important thing is how you adapt.”

Ari switched to a different camp the following summer and thankfully loved it (parents don’t want to pay for misery, even if it is character-building misery). After three seasons, he now considers his bunkmates to be some of his closest friends and wants to be a counselor next year. Knowing how to make a life jacket out of wet jeans isn’t the only life lesson you learn at summer camp. There are plenty of other sink-or-swim moments that stay with you forever. **■**