

Chapter VIII

Conclusion:

Look to the Woods for the Answers

For decades, camp has influenced the lives of countless Canadians, including me. My camp experience was so significant in my life that I chose to write my PhD dissertation on camp. I first attended sleepover camp at the age of seven and continued until the age of eighteen. Most summers, I attended camp for two months, meaning that I spent much of my youth away from my parents and the city. The summers I spent sailing, cheering in the dining hall, exploring on canoe trips, and learning to appreciate the wilderness will forever be a part of who I am. I remember camp as a special place – a place of freedom, of laughter, of growth. It was a place unlike my fast-paced city life that was inundated with rules, deadlines, and little time to rest. Many former campers hold similar sentimental memories of their camp experience. As a camper, I rarely questioned the traditions and social norms of camp. Saying “How How!” instead of clapping in the dining hall became second nature, just like relying on flashlights instead of light bulbs. The impetus of this study is to question those traditions and norms by critically examining the phenomenon of camp; where it came from; and how it developed. Five important threads of analysis are examined in this study including: the effect of the idea of modernism on Canadian society; the human/nature dualism and social construction of wilderness; the social construction of gender; the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples; and, finally character development in youth, in particular through physical activity. In examining these

threads, this study reveals middle-class Canadians' perceptions, ideals, and fears at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Summary

In the early 1900s, and particularly in the 1920s, private Ontario youth camps became a popular place for upper- and upper middle-class youth to spend their summers. A.L. Cochrane, Fannie Case, Ethel and Taylor Statten, Mary Edgar, Ed Archibald, Charles Plewman, and Mary Hamilton were the proprietors of some of the oldest youth camps in Ontario – most were located in the famed Algonquin Park and TFR. A variety of factors related to the social climate of the early twentieth century influenced these directors to open their camps.

Industrialization, urbanization, and shifting from an agricultural to industrialized economy triggered significant changes to societal structure, norms, and values resulting in fear and anxiety. There was a general dissatisfaction with certain social institutions and with the perceived changes to traditional middle-class ideals. From the 1890s to the 1930s, the spirit of reform was widespread. Fear of moral degradation was perceived as threatening tradition-motivated reformers and influenced movements such as the Social Gospel movement.¹

Anxiety about youth was a common concern. The transformation to a more urban society resulted in increased leisure time in the city and the development of a number of diversions that targeted youth, including cinemas, amusement parks, cafes, and dancehalls.² How youth spent their leisure time outside of school was particularly worrisome. Specifically, concerns about the

change in lifestyle focused on the physical and moral characteristics associated with masculinity that were traditionally developed in a rural landscape. In terms of girls and women, critics worried about their participation in unchaperoned leisure activities in the city that would compromise their morality and femininity. Youth work organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA and youth work programs such as the CSET and the CGIT existed to keep youth on the appropriate path and away from the temptations of the city. Boys' and girls' youth work programs alike focused on bolstering the all-around character of youth through activities aimed at enhancing spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social character traits. The physical aspect, in particular, became increasingly significant to youth work programs which was also the case in both private school and private camp. In this way, youth work organizations attempted to dissipate the negative influences of the city on youth. Emphasis on the all-around character of youth, coupled with the significance placed on physical activity in character formation, influenced private youth camp development in Ontario.

Modernism not only changed the city and the economy, but also made the delineation between civilization and wilderness even more profound. Harnessing wilderness for the use of people through resource extraction, leisure, and tourism became a symbol of industrialization related to progress. When Ontario was sufficiently industrialized and people realized that wilderness could fulfill their need for anti-modern experiences, the idea of appreciating and protecting the wilderness came to the fore. Concern about health in the crowded and industrialized city prompted the upper class to escape to the wilderness for a

short amount of time and rejuvenate. Algonquin Park, Muskoka, and the TFR offered a variety of vacation options for the well-off. Back-to-nature, rustic experiences were packaged with the option of modern convenience and luxury. Upper-class clientele used the Ontario wilderness to serve their needs, meaning that beginning in the late nineteenth century, elitism and anthropomorphism constructed wilderness.

Since the wilderness was mainly reserved for the upper class, it was not surprising that upper- and upper middle-class parents approved of sending their children away to private camps for the summer. Camp was part of the wilderness tourism movement in which parks, cottages, and resorts were constructed in Ontario's wilderness areas.³ The concern about the dismantling of traditional ideals in the city and questionable leisure habits by youth, coupled with the perceived health benefits of the wilderness, made camp a popular choice for well-off families. In addition, the fact that parents viewed private camp as an extension of private school into the summer months was a further reason to send well-off youth to camp. Thus, the elitism and anthropomorphism as associated with wilderness tourism is also evident in the development of private Ontario youth camps that served as a special and exclusive education for elite urban youth.

Camp was seen as one solution to the perceived problems of modernism in its relation to youth. Camp allegedly removed youth from the immoral influences of the city and surrounded them with the health-giving properties of wilderness, which was idealized at the time. Isolated from parental,

organizational, and city influences camp directors had an unprecedented opportunity to influence young people. Private camps were founded on the same principles of character development that were present in private schools and youth work organizations, both of which emphasized physical activity in the development of character. The value placed on this relationship is not surprising given that most of the camp directors in this study were teachers in private school, physical educators in private schools, and/or involved in youth work organizations that valued physical activity. The directors of these early camps envisioned camp to be more than just an extension of school, but rather a laboratory for character education. The length of time spent at camp, the wilderness surroundings of camp, and the isolation from outside civilization meant that camp directors could, in fact, create a temporary and unique society specific to camp that was rooted in developing idealized feminine and masculine character traits consistent with the era. Upon returning to the city, after a summer at camp, it was hoped that boys and girls reintegrated into normal society full of energy, new ideas of what they could accomplish, and character appropriate for boys and girls at the time, thereby appeasing some concern about the future of youth and the nation.

Conclusions

This study concludes that the isolation and wilderness setting of camp enabled directors to create a temporary society and unique camp culture aimed at building character perceived to be lacking in Ontario youth. One of the central

themes of this temporary society was that it differed as much as possible from school and the city. This was supported by various elements of the camping experience, including: wilderness-focused activities like canoe tripping, woodcraft, and campcraft; the downplaying of team sports popular in the city; the construction of a free and spontaneous environment with few rules; rustic buildings without modern conveniences; and, finally, Aboriginal symbolism used to bolster spirituality and fantasy at camp. This unique camp society made for a fun, adventurous, and special atmosphere that encouraged campers to adopt new ideologies. In this study, I argue that at camp, campers went through a socialization process different from the city. Camp confronted campers with surroundings and a way of life unlike their lives at home. The unique rules, traditions, and ideologies at camp meant that campers had to learn a new social structure and go through a new socialization process. The process of learning this social structure instilled certain character traits that camp directors wanted campers to acquire, such as cooperation, independence, self-reliance, and self-confidence. Establishing cabin groups and tribes, participating in canoe trips and traditions, like Council ring, brought a sense of belonging to campers that also enhanced levels of social solidarity within camp. Camp presented these socialization opportunities within a framework that emphasized freedom and action to campers in contrast to the strictness and passivity of school, which, in turn, made camp even more exceptional and attractive to campers.

The social construction of gender in boys' and girls' camp is a central theme in this study. The character traits emphasized and activities offered in

these mostly-female and mostly-male temporary societies depended on the traditional ideals of gender in the early twentieth century. Gendered physical activity was central to youth work organizations, private schools, and private camp. Educators, at the time, believed that physical activity and sport gave youth the opportunity to hone both their physical and mental skills, which was central to an all-around education. Wilderness-based physical activity was one of the roots of the camping movement. Exposing campers to activities not available in the city, such as canoeing, cabin-building, and campcraft meant that campers learned different skills at camp and tested different areas of their character. By the late 1920s, character education at camp capitalized on the differences between camp education and school education and became more methodical. Camp started to progress as its own unique type of educational institution using methods from academic disciplines such as sociology and psychology.

In the case of boys, by the late nineteenth century, there were two main concerns that were perceived to hamper the development of masculinity: the city and feminized institutions. Private boys' camp in the wilderness not only offered isolation from the evils of the city and the threat of feminized institutions, but also used physical activity to promote masculinity, a similar strategy to that employed by private boys' schools. Physical activity, as well as creative activities, in the wilderness acted as vehicles through which boys developed masculine character traits. Camp directors offered boys robust physical activities, such as boxing and wrestling, which developed traditional ideals of masculinity like toughness and courage. The canoe trip was the pinnacle test of primitive life where boys could

demonstrate and hone their masculinity and exercise the values learned at camp, while emulating the lives of early Canadian heroes. The canoe trip tested a boys ability to survive in the woods, endure physical discomfort, display physical stoicism, and experience the true “wilds” of the wilderness. Finally, camp was an opportunity to teach boys leadership skills that would prepare them to be the future leaders of the nation. Democratic principles including cooperative living, activity clubs, and democratic leadership were practiced at camp.

Girls participated in many of the same activities as boys did at camp which enhanced girls’ exposure to and participation in physical activity. Similar to boys, at camp girls had the opportunity to participate in activities that were unavailable in the city, such as canoe tripping, portaging, cabin-building, woodcraft, and campcraft. Simply having the opportunity to participate in these activities pushed the boundary of femininity and showed girls of what they were capable. The mostly-female and isolated environment of camp gave girls the freedom to experiment without the scrutiny of society. While there were many examples of pushing the boundary of femininity at camp, there were also examples of conformity to traditional femininity through the prominence of activities such as handicrafts, emphasis on good posture in the camp programs, and employing the patriarchal figure of male guides on girls’ canoe trips to do the heavy lifting. This created a tension between embracing and challenging traditional views of femininity, which was a significant feature of gender ideology in the early twentieth century. Prevailing ideologies influenced camp directors to distinguish between activities that were suitable for girls and women and those that were

suitable for boys and men. The ability of the pioneering female camp directors to skilfully navigate these conflicting ideologies and shifting boundaries of acceptable activities contributed to the creation of a distinctive camp culture for young women in the early twentieth century that both challenged and embraced traditional femininity at the time.

While the social construction of gender has a prominent place in this study, messages about class and race also need mention. Camp was constructed as an upper- and upper middle-class practice in the beginning of the twentieth century. Its creation can be seen as a message about twentieth century anxieties in terms of modernism, youth, and the future of Canada. When the wilderness came to be idealized, it was reserved for the well-off. Thus, the story of private Ontario youth camps in the 1920s and 1930s contributes to knowledge about class in the early twentieth century. The portrayal of Aboriginal peoples in non-Aboriginal youth camps is an important aspect of this study. Aboriginal peoples were not only removed from wilderness areas in favour of upper-class white tourists, but also elements of Aboriginal culture were selectively chosen by camp directors in order to enhance values deemed important for the creation and maintenance of a unique camp culture based on its anti-modern premise. Aboriginals were perceived as a direct link to the past and the ideals associated with the perceptions of the past. Camp directors emphasized their sense of racial privilege by using cultural appropriation to enhance their unique camp society. Encouraging campers to play Indian temporarily during the summer emphasized the superiority of the dominant white culture as Aboriginals were depicted as

primitive, while white people were depicted as progressive and modern.⁴ During the summer, campers knew that camp was temporary and while Indian lore was fun, it was not reality. Reinforcing the connection between Natives and a primitive past contributed to a sense that true Indian culture had disappeared and helped to sustain the superiority of the hegemonic culture in North America.⁵

Attending camp is a practice that continues to flourish today. It could be argued that today upper middle-class and upper-class parents send their children to private camp for the same reasons parents did in the early twentieth century. This suggests that there continues to be dissatisfaction with the idea of modernism. Indeed, canoe tripping, camping, cottaging, and vacationing at wilderness lodges persist as popular leisure activities in the summer. Studying how this phenomenon developed leads to a deeper understanding of present society and issues revolving around the wilderness and modernism.

This study is situated within the context of the wilderness and how it was utilized to benefit campers. It takes the perspective that the perception of modernism delineated the separation between humans and nature and civilization and wilderness. While modernism and civilization were dominant, the wilderness was (and is) used as a temporary escape from mainstream modernism in the city. Within this context, this study examines three interrelated themes: the social construction of gender at boys' and girls' camps; the portrayal of Aboriginal peoples at camp; and, finally, character education for youth in the wilderness setting of camp. The wilderness setting of camp inspired the creation of a temporary camp society meaning that campers existed within a social

structure that differed from the school and home. While prevailing ideals pertaining to gender, race, and character education were reflected at camp, the environment allowed for these ideals to be expanded. Girls had the opportunity to participate in activities that they would not have been exposed to in the city and camp activities bolstered the rugged masculinity that camp directors and parents perceived to be lacking in boys. The temporary camp society made camp a unique educational institution that prided itself on cultivating character in youth that was not possible in the city. The wilderness context of camp and desire for anti-modern experiences influenced the use of Aboriginal lore at camp. The environment seemed to legitimize the use of Indian lore to camp directors, even though it was neither based on fact nor reflective of Aboriginal people's reality.

Today, as in the past, the wilderness is considered to be a place apart from normal life. It is a place reserved for rejuvenation and reflectivity - a place that people go to breathe and find answers. Like camp directors in the early twentieth century, camp directors in the early twenty-first century feel an affinity toward the wilderness and believe in its power to inspire character in youth. In the words of Joanne Kates, the third generation director of Camp Arowhon⁶ in Algonquin Park: "Wilderness is the context in which everything happens...It permeates our consciousness. It feeds us deeply and changes us...Even if the campers don't think about it every day...it lifts their soul. It teaches them to go deep inside themselves."⁷

Further Research

When Christopher McCandless ventured into the Alaskan backcountry, he was looking for something that his modern life had not adequately provided. He wanted to remove himself from civilization and get “lost in the wild.”⁸ As shown in this study, leaving civilization and going into the wilderness has been a common theme for well over a century. The result of industrialization, modernism, and a heavily constructed society is that getting away to an anti-modern atmosphere for a short period of time is attractive to many people. In addition, getting “lost in the wild” seems to feed a spiritual desire to connect to the natural. More recently, television shows such as “Survivor” and “Eco Challenge” capitalize on this interest in the interaction between people and wilderness, and the appeal of the age old concept of the conquest of nature. Intrepid eco-adventure tours and travel are becoming more and more popular for tourists. One recommendation for further study is to build on the idea of human’s interaction with the wilderness and apply it to wilderness-based sport such as adventure racing and expedition racing. How does the wilderness atmosphere of these sports compare to city-based sport? Why do people put themselves in dangerous and challenging situations in the wilderness?

Nineteenth century American poet Walt Whitman said: “Now I see the secret of making the best persons. It is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.”⁹ Clearly, this is a sentiment that camp directors of the past and present wholeheartedly embrace. The wilderness environment of camp provides an unprecedented opportunity for character formation. The American

company, Wilderness Ventures, which specializes in worldwide wilderness trips for teenagers, includes Whitman's quote in its marketing, promotion, and training literature. The character forming potential of wilderness-based physical activity influences this company, in similar ways that it influenced Ontario camps in the early twentieth century. In recent decades, there has been a rise in experiential education organizations and companies that focus on wilderness trips for teenagers. Among the most well-known organizations is Outward Bound. Further study on this topic would compare the goals and aims of private Ontario camps in the early twentieth century with these experiential education organizations. How do the values and goals of these organizations compare? What does this say about youth organizations and society in general? In addition, many groups utilize the wilderness to help rehabilitate troubled youth. This represents another interesting area of further study.

A deeper understanding of the wilderness, how it is constructed, a human being's relationship to it, and how it is used are consistent themes in this study as well as in areas suggested for future research. Studying the wilderness provides a lens through which we can examine the complexities and inequalities in society. Wilderness scholarship is growing as environmental problems become more and more pressing and more scholarship is needed to understand the fragility of the human/nature relationship. This study shows that in the context of wilderness, gender, race, class, and character were constructed at early twentieth century private Ontario youth camps.

Endnotes

¹ Allan Levine *The Devil in Babylon: Fear and Progress and the Birth of Modern Life* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 2005), 17-18; Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 3.

² Cynthia Comacchio, *The Dominion of Youth: Adolescence and the Making of Modern Canada 1920-1955* (Waterloo: Waterloo University Press, 2006), 162-163, 166-167.

³ David S. Churchill, "Organized Wilderness: The Algonquin Camps and the Creation of the Modern Wilderness," in *Using Wilderness: Essays on the Evolution of Youth Camping on Ontario*, ed. Bruce W. Hodgins and Bernadine Dodge (The Frost Centre for Canadian Heritage and Development Studies, Trent University, 1992), 105, 107.

⁴ Sharon Wall, "Negotiating Modernity: Nature and Nurture at Ontario Children's Camps, 1920-1955" (PhD diss., York University, 2003), 532-533; Abigail A. Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 207.

⁵ Van Slyck, 212.

⁶ Camp Arowhon was initially planned to be part of this study. However, due to lack of literature in comparison to the 8 camps chosen, Arowhon was not included.

⁷ Joanne Kates, interview by author, May 11, 2009, Toronto, Ont.

⁸ Jon Krakauer, "Death of an Innocent." *Outside Magazine* (January 1993), http://outside.away.com/outside/features/1993/1993_into_the_wild_6.html (accessed Nov 17, 2008).

⁹ Walt Whitman, as quoted in Mike Cottingham, ed., *Wilderness Ventures Book of Quotations* (Jackson, Wyoming: Wilderness Ventures, 1990), 113.