

Wisconsin's Youth Conservation Corps

By Kay Krans with Frank DiLeonardi

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw an America with a renewed focus on the environment. The Great Depression era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) had been a remarkable success story, and there were several attempts to bring back camps modeled after that program on state and national levels. In Wisconsin, Governor Gaylord Nelson led the charge.

Under Nelson's leadership, Wisconsin passed into law in 1961 the Outdoor Recreation Action Program, establishing parks, wilderness areas and the Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), which was modeled after the CCC.

The youth for the YCC were selected by high school principals, who chose students with strong work ethics and an interest in careers in natural resources. The program strived to enroll students from each county, providing constructive conservation employment during the summer for high school boys (with girls added in 1973).

The goals of the YCC were:

- 1) To give summer work experience in conservation
- 2) To develop constructive work habits
- 3) To offer the opportunity of living with others, both socially and democratically
- 4) To develop an understanding and appreciation of the state's natural resources
- 5) To become self-reliant
- 6) To develop leadership

Statehouse Lake was the first YCC camp and became the model for the other camps. The first three camps, their directors and locations were

- Statehouse Lake YCC led by Robert Brismaster in Manitowish Waters
- Nancy Lake (Ernie Swift) YCC led by Fred Lengfeld in Minong
- Mecan River YCC led by Allison McCain in Montello

Eventually, a fourth camp was added, Kettle Moraine YCC in Campbellsport.

The Wisconsin departments of Conservation and Public Welfare were in charge of the camps and their work. The Wisconsin Conservation Department (today the Department of Natural Resources, or DNR) was given the call of supervising and planning work for the campers. The mission of the Public Welfare Department was to help with the administration of the camp like the kitchen and food supplies.

The State of Wisconsin had millions of acres of land for which to care for economic profit, conservation of the land, and recreational use by the citizens of the state. The work for the youth was to assist with projects created by Wisconsin Conservation Department professionals. The placement of the program

partially under the Department of Welfare led, in part, to the false perception that the camps were set up for delinquent or under-privileged youth. In fact, the purpose was to recruit young men interested in pursuing a career in the natural resources. Eventually, the camps came under the sole jurisdiction of the Department of Natural Resources.

The first camp sessions were six weeks long. Then camps ran two, five-week sessions that initially included 100 boys for each session. Through the years that changed to 50 boys and 50 girls each time. In the early 1990s, camp sessions were shortened to four-week sessions because of school calendars in the state. The early campers made \$18 a week plus room and board, working a 40-hour week. In 1991, the campers were working 32 hours per week (with eight hours focused on education) and were paid \$4.25 an hour with \$40 a week deducted from pay for room and board. Each camp had the following staff: the director, assistant director, environmental education coordinator, 10 counselors, and two cooks.

Gaylord Nelson, Wisconsin Governor 1959-1963, Wisconsin U.S. Senator 1963-1981, Founder of Earth Day on April 22, 1970

Known as the nation's conservation governor, Nelson's vision of *New Environmentalism* led to bipartisan support in Wisconsin and nationally to protect and conserve our natural resources. The Wisconsin YCC was created through his inspiration and guidance, and was based on education, wise stewardship of natural resources and social justice. His idea of the YCC was to improve the environment by employing youth ages 16-19. In 1961, he fought for Wisconsin's Outdoor Recreation Action Program, which created over one million acres of parks and wilderness areas and the Wisconsin YCC. It was first funded by a one-cent per pack cigarette tax.

Nelson was driven by his love of the outdoors and the ideal of conserving nature for others to enjoy. Hailing from Clear Lake, WI, Nelson was steeped in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the Progressive Era, stemming back to Wisconsin's first state forester, E.M. Griffith.

"Within nine months, 200 youth had enrolled. Two-thirds of the nearly 80,000-worker-days expended in the first five years of the program went into timber stand improvement such as clearing, planting, thinning and release projects, along with parks development," according to YCC Reports to the Wisconsin Conservation Commission and the DNR.

As a U.S. Senator, Nelson supported a National YCC, saying of Wisconsin's YCC: "...they have made a remarkable constructive contribution to a whole range of conservation work in the areas of timber stand improvement, stream bank stabilization, tree planting, creation of campsites and outdoor facilities, the building of fire lanes, and park grounds improvement."

Through Nelson's tireless commitment and the success of Wisconsin's YCC camps such as Statehouse Lake, President Richard Nixon signed legislation that created the National YCC in 1971. Building off the Wisconsin model, the National YCC proved so successful that Congress expanded it and made it a permanent national endeavor in 1974.

Throughout the more than the 30-year history of the program, some school counselors chose a few students because they felt they needed the discipline of the experience at camp. After the federal

government created the YCC on the federal level, young women and minorities also became a priority in the selection process.

Former Wisconsin U.S. Senator Russ Feingold stated: "Gaylord Nelson reflected the very best of our state from the very beginning, building on Wisconsin's long tradition of environmental conservation."

Statehouse Lake YCC Camp Facilities

In the first year of operation (1962), 1100 high school boys applied to Statehouse Lake YCC Camp, with 100 selected. The camp was designed around recreation, work, education and group living.

One of the short-term goals was to create the facilities to meet those needs. In the developing years, campers were assigned carpentry duties under the supervision of the Conservation Department. They built tent-housing initially and then the cabins on cabin row in the mid-1960s. They also built the log swimming dock, the amphitheater and the sauna, and reconstructed the Post Exchange (PX). And, they worked on leveling and laying out the volleyball courts and baseball fields.

The amphitheater was the gathering spot for camp meetings, skits and outdoor educational gatherings, and it is still a central meeting point today at the North Lakeland Discovery Center, which is located on the Statehouse Lake YCC site. The historic log sauna sits adjacent to the beach and was a very popular place for campers on their return from a hard day's work. It was built with rocks from Lake Superior, with the cement foundation and floor acquired for free from an overturned cement truck on Highway 51!

The Conservation Department gave the PX and library to the Statehouse Lake YCC Camp. It is one of the last remaining examples of a CCC building in Wisconsin today. Taken down from its original site, it was reassembled by campers and staff, and it became the center of camp recreation. Campers took on odd jobs in town to earn money to purchase the juke box, ping pong table and other "amenities" in the Rec Hall.

Camp Routine and Schedule

Wake up and cabin clean up 6:30 a.m.

Breakfast 7:15 a.m.

WORK DAY 8:00 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (there were two, 15-minute breaks and a 45-minute lunch break; travel was also included in the day of work)

4:35 p.m.- 5:00 p.m. swim time

5:00 p.m.-5:30 p.m. quiet time

5:30 p.m. flag ceremony and dinner

7:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m. education and recreation

10:00 p.m. lights out

The Dining Hall

The "chow line" was through the west door of the building in single file. After the bell sounded, the campers would go through the line and sit wherever they liked. When all had been through the line, the bell rang again for "seconds." Once the trays were all sent back to the kitchen, it was time for prayers and announcements. On Wednesdays and Sundays, campers had to show a "meal pass," which was a letter or postcard collected at the dining hall and mailed home.

Barracks

Counselors were expected to have a tidy tent, and his campers would strive to be the highest rated tent. Rewards included free ice cream, first place in the chow line, or first pick of the work assignments for the week. The tent with the lowest score would have wheel barrel duty to bring topsoil to the newest grass area that was being created.

Recreation Time

The camp store was known as the Post Exchange, or the PX. Its purpose was to keep the campers from having to go to Manitowish Waters for supplies and offer them the lowest prices possible for purchases. All profit from the PX went to purchasing recreational equipment for the camp. Off duty time was considered time for relaxation, with some unstructured time for the campers. Swimming, fishing, boating, reading, horseshoes, ping pong and ball games were popular. Campers were permitted to walk to Manitowish Waters to go to the various stores. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were times of leisure. The campers could get a pass to go to Mercer or Minocqua, with every man getting a chance to go to town once a week. Friday afternoons were time for educational field trips and lectures.

There was a library located at the PX with books purchased or donated.

There was also a pay telephone for camper use after 9 pm, and it cost \$.75 for a 10-minute call home. Statehouse Lake sold camp postcards and encouraged their use as they were informational. Sunday rides to church were common, and many of the campers attended Manitowish Waters Community Church and Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church.

Robert Brismaster, First Director, Statehouse Lake YCC

The first director of the YCC at Statehouse Lake was Robert Brismaster, a UW-Oshkosh professor in the speech department. He served in World War II in the Eighth Air Force Photo Reconnaissance Group. He directed the camp in a military style, believing in character building as an essential part of the camp experience.

When the bill to create a National YCC was in the making, Brismaster stressed to his counselors how important their job was to make the camp successful because success in Wisconsin would help

determine the fate of the National YCC. Brismaster's leadership helped Statehouse Lake become a prototype for what would become the National YCC in 1971.

Former assistant director Thor Sande said, "Mr. Brismaster is synonymous with Statehouse Lake YCC Camp. He made the camp what it was." Former camper Bob Neuman felt that "Robert Brismaster was the perfect guy at the right time to teach the kids the right way." And another former camper, Sean Davidson, said: "Much of the integrity that I possess today can be traced to my experience at Statehouse Lake. I have benefitted from it in my personal and professional life ever since."

His obituary in 2003 stated: "It may have been his years at Statehouse Lake YCC which Brismaster left his most important legacy as he helped turn boys into men and gave them direction for their future." Through his leadership and direction, the camp took on a life that can still be seen at the North Lakeland Discovery Center.

Brismaster was dedicated to serving the Wisconsin Conservation Department in meeting its goals for the state while helping young people become motivated to see results from their work as well as building their self-respect as contributors to the great work that they were completing. Specific projects were designed so that campers could see outcomes from their work and take pride and ownership for their contribution, an important element to Brismaster in the development of campers.

"Robert Brismaster, Statehouse Lakes Camp Director for many years, stressed that the original intent was to get work done in an outdoor atmosphere." ("YCC at 30," by Rob Drieslein, Wisconsin Natural Resources Magazine) At the same time, the Conservation Department was able to use the 32-hour work week and the man-hours of these young people to complete vital jobs in the five project areas that helped the Conservation Department in many ways. Brismaster believed that the structured military atmosphere of the camps helped the young men to become disciplined and build a common bond of friendship and work that improved the environment. By the 1990s, the philosophy of camp life still centered on the conservation of natural resources and hard work. The strict military style of the early years was softened, and the new philosophy centered on learning self-respect and respect for others.

In the early 1960s, Wisconsin was one of a few states with a youth conservation program. Wisconsin became a model for the development of a national program. In 1964, Brismaster wrote in his forward of the Statehouse Lake Counselors' Handbook that national legislation was pending in both houses of Congress to create a national YCC based on the model of the Wisconsin YCC and others. He commented that since the end of World War II almost every session of Congress brought up the idea of creating a Civilian Conservation Corps-like program to help our nation's youth find meaningful work training. President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty" included the concept.

Brismaster felt that this was the most likely time that the national YCC legislation would be passed. He mentioned that Herbert Humphrey, Gaylord Nelson, Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg, Interior Secretary Stewart Udall and Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman were all in favor of the national legislation. Most importantly, he stressed to his young counselors that it was their duty to do all in their power to make sure that the work of the campers was critical. He felt that the Wisconsin youth involved would help make or break the passage of the national legislation. They must do a great job in helping those in

their charge work well with their Conservation Department supervisors. He believed those opposed to a federal YCC could find fuel for their opposition if the camp did not run well and that supporters could find fuel for the proponents if camp was successful. "The Wisconsin YCC counselor...must commit to a perseverance to duty and a ready willingness to go that proverbial extra mile which one day might result in a thousandfold expansion of our Wisconsin enrollment." (Excerpt from Brismaster's forward to the Statehouse Lake Counselors' Handbook, 1964)

A national Youth Conservation Corps was created with the passage of Public Law 91-378 in 1970 that was signed into law by President Richard Nixon in 1971. Perhaps a testament to the success of Wisconsin's YCC program, the National YCC proved so successful that Congress expanded it and made it a permanent national endeavor on September 3, 1974. The new legislation authorized \$60 million annually for the federal YCC.

The Work of the Campers

The work accomplished by the campers of Statehouse Lake was in five field divisions of the Conservation Department:

- 1) Parks and Recreation with assignments through Trout Lake
- 2) Forest Protection with assignments through the Mercer Ranger Station
- 3) Forest Management with assignments through the Mercer Ranger Station
- 4) Game Management with assignments through project headquarters in Woodruff
- 5) Fisheries Division with assignments through project headquarters in Woodruff

Conservation Department professionals chose proposed projects for the YCC, sent the proposals to Madison for approval, and man-days were assigned for each project area. The Conservation Department committed a field supervisor to be the technical advisor, and a YCC counselor would follow that supervisor. The welfare of the youth in the field was the responsibility of the counselor. Statehouse Lake policy was simply, "each camper was a man capable of a man's work." Brismaster made it clear to his counselors that, "This camp is a work operation; the state legislature in authorizing tax monies for youth conservation did so with the expectation of a dollar returned for each dollar invested." Campers who were not willing to work hard were to be discharged and sent home.

Each camp had 10 counselors, who worked with the camp director and assistant director to help each camper succeed in their work and complete assigned jobs. The counselor was to be attentive to safety at all times. Projects were designed so that campers could see the outcome of their efforts, helping to build pride and ownership for their work.

Some of the work performed by the Statehouse YCC campers over the years included work on the Escanaba Trail, the Crystal Lake Campground, the Firefly Campground, and manning the fire towers in Manitowish Waters, Boulder Junction and Mercer.

Early campers were paid \$18-\$21 a week, and they were expected to work 40 hours a week. Although it looked as if they were making around \$.50 an hour, their camp experience and room and board were all

part of the package. Brismaster reminds us in his writings that campers at other camps were **paying** \$600 a session for experiences similar to what the YCC campers were experiencing with little of the training and experience the Statehouse Lake youth were receiving.

During the second year of operation, Statehouse Lake administration authorized the use of outpost camps, similar to the approach taken by the Civilian Conservation Corps, to alleviate much of the time spent in travel from camp to work site. The manning of an outpost camp was by tent, and later cabin, with rotation for one week at a time. One counselor manned the outpost camp for the entire two sessions. In the early years, there were two, six-week sessions of camp with 100 enrollees per session. Later, sessions were shortened due to school calendar changes.

Ten percent of the men were assigned to the housekeeping function. Housekeeping consisted of food service duty, latrine duty ("sandbox" duty), laundry maid duty, supply assistant, and buildings and grounds crew. Each camp also had two cooks, and the campers were assigned kitchen duties to make the food service portion of the camp run smoothly. The Statehouse Lake head cook for many years was Frieda Breyer or, as the campers called her, "Ma."

Work Project Highlights

As the Wisconsin Historical Society's archives of annual YCC work reports show, the campers put in thousands of man-hours into the progress and management of Wisconsin's natural resources. If you are biking in the Boulder Junction/Sayner area and go through the Crystal Lake Campground, you will see the grass that was planted by the YCC workers years ago. If you travel through the Firefly Campground, you still will see the beautiful campsites that were roughed out and completed by Statehouse Lake work crews. The Escanaba Trail was totally built by the high school labor of YCC campers. They also worked at Lake Superior, Madeleine Island and Copper Falls State Park; and they manned the fire towers at Mercer, Boulder Junction and Manitowish Waters. They worked on the campgrounds of Starrett Lake and South Trout Lake. They improved trout streams with riparian walls built with their bare hands. They brushed out fire lanes to protect the small towns around the area. They brushed out areas of Powell Marsh to improve the wild fowl habitat. Through the years, they built the camp at Statehouse Lake. They were guided by carpenters but did the work to complete the buildings that are still standing at the North Lakeland Discovery Center.

Brismaster used this quote from a message to Congress by Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 to stress the importance of these projects. Roosevelt said "that in this stage of the world's history, to be fearless, to be just, and to be efficient are the three great requirements of national life. National efficiency is the result of natural resources well handled, of freedom of opportunity for every man, and of the inherent capacity, trained ability, knowledge, and will--collectively and individually--to use that opportunity." The YCC at Manitowish Waters was a great training ground for young men and eventually young women to understand their roles as stewards of their own futures and of the natural environment that they worked to improve and protect.

An Opportunity of a Lifetime

The Wisconsin experiment with the creation of the YCC was a great opportunity for thousands of Wisconsin high school students who participated during the program's 33 years of existence. The hours completed by the young men and women were a massive contribution to meeting the goals of the camp, the Conservation Department/DNR and the state. Many of the young men and women who attended the camps became professionals in the field of natural resources. After the YCC's last season in 1995, other programs rose up to help young people become interested in the environment such as various county conservation camps. The knowledge gained by YCC campers was passed on many times over by those whose lives and career goals followed them from their camp experience.

Statehouse Lake YCC Camp shaped the lives of many young men and women. Here are highlights for two campers.

Kermit Traska

While at UW-Stevens Point, Traska became a counselor at Statehouse Lake, where he worked from 1968-1970. Upon graduation and after teaching biology for the Randolph School District, Traska became a camp director at Ernie Swift YCC from 1971-1972 and then camp director at Kettle Moraine YCC from 1973-1976. He led the first all-girl YCC camp as well as the first co-ed camp.

One of his favorite memories of Statehouse Lake YCC was the night he took 10 young men to Lake Superior to gather rocks for the sauna they were building at camp. It was June 29, 1969, the day the first man walked on the moon. "We all sat on the beach that night, talked about the historic moment and looked at the full moon in its full glory." He was majoring in Natural Resources and minoring in biology.

Traska went on to a 29-year career in the Department of Natural Resources, starting at Perrot State Park as manager. He created one of the first friend's groups in the Wisconsin States Park System. He then became supervisor of the Southern District Park Service. He was instrumental in helping with the restoration of a Frank Lloyd Wright building at Mirror Lake State Park. He went on to become Chief of the Bureau of Wisconsin State Parks and Recreation. Toward the end of his career, he transferred to the Bureau of Property Management where he developed the master plan for the 16,000-acre Willow Flowage property.

His experiences with the Wisconsin YCC enhanced his knowledge and opportunity to create a lifelong career, working to improve the environment and helping people enjoy the natural areas of Wisconsin. Traska stated, "Many of the young men and women who attended YCC camps went on to work in natural resources careers not only in Wisconsin, but in other states as well as on the federal level."

Adrian Wydeven

After working at Statehouse Lake, Wydeven received bachelor degrees from UW-Stevens Point in 1976 and a masters from Iowa State University in 1979. He went on to a 30+-year career with the Wisconsin DNR, including leading the state's wolf recovery program. He also was involved with various efforts

concerning American martens, lynx, cougars and other carnivores, serving on the state wolf, furbearer, elk, marten, and bat advisory committees, as well as other state and federal wildlife advisory committees. Following his DNR career, he became the coordinator of the Timber Wolf Alliance with the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute (SOEI) at Northland College in Ashland.

“I applied to go to Statehouse Lake because I was interested in conservation work, and the camp was way up in northern Wisconsin. My family grew up near Appleton in eastern central Wisconsin. Though we had only traveled to the southern edge of the Northwoods in Shawano, Oconto and Langlade counties, I was thrilled when I learned of my acceptance to the camp. While I was already interested in working with natural resources, my experiences at Statehouse Lake encouraged me to focus and commit to a career in wildlife conservation. My YCC experience also instilled in me a sense of stewardship toward the management and conservation of our wildlands. And Statehouse Lake caused me to totally fall in love with northern Wisconsin and the hope I would someday be able to live in this part of the state.”

Born in the Netherlands in 1952, Wydeven’s family immigrated to the US in 1959, settling in Kimberly, about 20 miles southwest of Green Bay. He graduated from Kimberly High School in 1971. He obtained BS degrees in Biology and Wildlife Management at UW-Stevens Point in 1976 and an MS degree in Wildlife Ecology from Iowa State University in 1979. His master’s research focused on food habitats, habitat use, and competitive interactions of elk with other mammalian herbivores.

After starting his career in 1980 as an assistant wildlife area manager in northeast Missouri, Wydeven returned to Wisconsin in 1982 to work for the DNR as a wildlife manager. Over the next eight years, he worked at stations in Oshkosh, Appleton and Shawano. In 1990, he began work as a non-game biologist in Park Falls, heading up the state wolf recovery and management programs through 2013, as well as other programs on non-game wildlife in northern Wisconsin, with his title changing to mammalian ecologist in 1993 as his focus became mainly mammals, especially carnivores. Along with leading the state wolf program, he was involved with the monitoring and management of American martens, surveys for lynx, investigations of cougar observations, surveys of other carnivores, and serving on the state wolf, furbearer, elk, marten, and bat advisory committees, as well as other state and federal wildlife advisory committees. In August 2012, his title changed to Carnivore Specialist in Wildlife Management in the DNR. In February 2013, Wydeven worked as a Forest Wildlife Specialist, promoting forest management practices that enhanced or protected habitats for various forest wildlife species, working closely with foresters, land agencies and landowners. He retired from the DNR in January 2015.

In September 2015, he became the coordinator of the Timber Wolf Alliance with the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute (SOEI) at Northland College in Ashland, and remained at that position until June 2017. He continues to volunteer as the Chair of the Timber Wolf Alliance, conducting workshops and talks; wolf, bird and bat surveys; and Snapshot camera surveys for WDNR.

Statehouse Lake Legacy

Things changed at the camp over the years, but the work continued to support the DNR. The boys had longer hair and there were now girls who had the opportunity to work in the field and determine if this

would be their lifelong work. More effort was made to include minority youth from the inner city of Milwaukee. Discipline changed with the times and the mood of the country.

In 1995, the YCC camps closed their doors. As one camper stated, "We had hands-on educational times in the woods with our leaders, learning about plants, animals and eco systems. We took field trips, lived in cabins and had simple meals. We were paid a modest sum for our efforts, and it was totally worth it." More than 24,000 Wisconsin high school students participated at work camps across the state. By the mid-1990s, budget cuts, liability concerns, and changing social norms created issues for the YCC.

Because of the vision of teachers and citizens in the Manitowish Waters area, the camp went on to become the North Lakeland Discovery Center, and we are still learning about the wise use of our natural resources and to foster a land ethic for future generations of our state and nation. An article in *Wisconsin Natural Resources* magazine on the 30th anniversary of the YCC had this statement by Ray Hendrikse, the last director of the YCC for the DNR: "The simple truth of the matter is that without the assistance of the youth camps, development, restoration and maintenance of state parks, wildlife areas, forests, streams and lakes would be severely reduced. Without them, conservation work would continue to get done, but to a much lesser degree..."

Other Camp Stories

"It was okay."

Bob Mayfield was a young high school student finishing his sophomore year when his father came home from work one day and announced that Bob would be going to camp during the summer. His father told him that his counselor at school needed to recommend him and that he needed to fill out forms at school. Bob's father was the Director of the Bureau of Clerical Services for the DNR, and he had been visiting with John Holmes, the man who was the head of the YCC program for the DNR at the time. Holmes had told the elder Mayfield that the best YCC camp to attend was the Statehouse Lake Camp. So, during the 1970 summer session, Mayfield went to camp, and when asked why he chose to come work at the Statehouse Lake YCC camp, he said, "My dad made me come. You can imagine what the personnel thought about me. As you arrived, you were assigned a cabin starting from the back of the row of cabins to the front. I was assigned to Redhead Cabin." At the end of his session, Mayfield added, "When my dad picked me up, we drove for about half an hour, and he asked me how it was. I replied, 'It was okay, maybe I'll go back next summer.' I went back the next year and asked to stay both sessions, and for the next five years stayed all summer as well."

"Take a bit off the top?"

Brismaster was quite the charmer. When the state decided to pave the road to Statehouse Lake Camp, Mr. B., as he was known, had a plan. He wanted a paved volleyball court for the boys as well. He invited all the crew who were building the road for lunch. He asked them if they took a quarter inch off the top of the road, would that leave enough left over for the volleyball court. They did it, and no one was the wiser. Another time, he heard that a building was going to be torn down on state land. He asked that if

the campers helped with the project, could the camp have the building to rebuild at Statehouse Lake. That building became the PX and library.

The Dinner Bell

As reported by an anonymous source: "When I was a counselor, four of us drove to YCC Ernie Swift, which was in Minong, Wisconsin. It was a Friday night, and we were out to steal their bell. We left our car between a quarter and an eighth of a mile away so no one would see us. When we got to the bell, we found that it was pad locked. We came prepared and had a blanket and the tool to saw off the lock. The blanket was used to muffle the sound. Two guys held the bell still, and one guy held the clapper. A huge storm came up as we were carrying it off, and I slipped and the clapper rang just as lightning sounded. No one seemed to hear, and we got to the car with the bell. We got away."

Today, the question might be was this story the first volley lobbed or retribution? Because, here's another story.

"Ernie Swift counselors stole our bell and got away. I slept in the back office, and they got on the roof of the building to get the bell. I slept right through the theft. I really heard about that the next morning. One of the counselors was at a tavern in town and saw a car come out of the side road of camp. He knew that was fishy and wrote down the license number. It was traced to the other camp, and they had to return it."

Life Lessons

"We learned what respect meant, life skills, and a work ethic. I was 16 my first summer, and it was my first time away from home and at camp. I was the oldest of nine children from Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. I came away from camp with the best experience of my life. It was the foundation of who I am! I learned my work ethic, I learned how to be away from home, I learned to be part of something different than I had ever known, and I learned discipline and camaraderie."

Even Romance!

"We had passes to go to town and one of my cabin mates who was also from Beaver Dam and I went to Minocqua. I was 16, and she was a blond and beautiful, and I met her through a friend at camp. She came to camp to visit me, and I played the guitar for her by the lake. Her family had an A-frame summer home on Diamond Lake. I even went to Verona to visit her. We told our parents to pick us up a couple of days after camp ended, and we went and camped on Diamond Lake near Kathy's house. My friend and I took an axe and two blankets from camp. Boy, did we get a nasty letter from the state and returned those items after the letter. Anyway, we camped and got chased by a bear and ended up getting invited to stay at Kathy's house until our parents picked us up at Diamond Lake. I visited her once after the Marines in Madison, Wisconsin. It was the best summer of my life. I fell in love with the Northwoods; I fell in love with the white pine. Now, as I am retired, I have my own place in the Northwoods."

Romance Part II

Thor Sande, one-time assistant director of Statehouse Lake camp, first heard about the YCC camp over the loud speaker at school. "It was announced that you could sign up for a conservation camp. It was a work camp and a learning camp. You had to be 16, and I was 16. This was at my high school, which was Cadott High School." He would spend the next 16 summers at Statehouse Lake from 1965-1981 and where he met his wife.

"Marti Rahm was the assistant cook in the summer of 1978 at Statehouse Lake. She was a dietetics major in college who would be starting graduate school in the fall. She was from Wisconsin Rapids. We fell in love and eventually got married. The next summer she was assigned to Ernie Swift YCC Camp. She became the head cook there. I think that was the director's way of splitting us up.

"I went to my first session of camp in 1965. My folks delivered me into the beautiful Northwoods. They were still using the tents. They were just like the tents in MASH. There were 10-12 boys in a tent. College boys were counselors. The director of the camp, Mr. Brismaster, was an ex-army sergeant and a professor at UW-Oshkosh. He was a very hard-nosed guy. Well I was tossed in with 100-110 kids.

"A bell rang for breakfast and dinner and the camp was run in the military style. There were rules, and we were herded along, not much rudeness ever occurred."

Sande recalls the routine as a camper:

- Inspection of the barracks
- Assignment of work crews; campers were kept together according to tents
- Pine plantation crew
- Marsh trimming crew
- Trout stream crew
- Building boat landing slabs
- Dock building crew at Statehouse Lake (built with logs)

"Mr. Brismaster is synonymous with Statehouse Lake Camp. He made the camp what it was. There were several directors after Brismaster but none made improvements each summer like he did. None of them were as important."

Sande also reports on the activities at camp. "Every summer Brismaster had a major improvement project. We had skits. We sang songs...Hootenanny, folk songs of the time. There were movies on Saturday night in the outdoor theatre called the Playpen. It is torn down now. We had an area with log bleachers. Each cabin had a section. The campers built the stage area with plans and the help of a carpenter. We had a ball field.

"The counselors needed to learn as much about the kids as they could. It was important to know who to praise and build their confidence, and who to kick in the butt. It was also important to reward the most deserving and hardest working kids at any of the projects.

“One year, Lafollette sent his son to the Statehouse Lake YCC, and another time the TV show “60 Minutes” came and filmed for two to three days and did a story on youth camps. Dan Rather was the commentator. Each summer there might be a visit from a state senator as well.”

Wisconsin Youth Conservation Corps Over The Years

- 1961 Outdoor Recreation Action Program established
- 1962 First summer camp at Statehouse Lake
- 1966 Enrollment drops; welfare myth emerges
- 1967 Kellett Reorganization Act; removes Welfare Department from YCC structure
- 1971-1974 Organization of the Federal YCC
- 1973 First female camp experience
- 1974 First co-ed camp at Kettle Moraine Camp
- 1978 10 more hours/week of education added; work hours decreased from 40 to 32/week
- 1981 Wisconsin budget shortfalls, federal funding phase out threaten Wisconsin YCC program; staggering youth unemployment saves program
- 1985 Camper wage at \$3.35/hour; \$27.50 per month put toward room and board
- 1986 850 campers totaling 125,000 work hours, \$250M in labor value to Wisconsin
- 1987 Counselors now mainly college students majoring in science or conservation; four applicants/camper slot
- 1995 Last year of Wisconsin YCC
- 1996 North Lakeland Elementary School and North Lakeland Discovery Center lease the property from the DNR