

The First Girls' Camp in Alaska

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One May evening in 1915, seventeen girls and four women boarded a steamer in Juneau, Alaska, for the thirty-six hour journey to Sitka. They were on their way to Alaska's first girls' camp and would spend the next week living in tents, hiking, singing, and sharing the fun of camp life like Camp Fire Girls everywhere.

Guardian of Juneau's Yallani Camp Fire Girls, Edith M. Kempthorne was a music teacher from New Zealand who loved hiking and camping. She was assisted by Frances Gulick, daughter of Camp Fire founders Luther Halsey and Charlotte Vetter Gulick.

Kempthorne had organized Alaska's first Camp Fire Girls in October 1913, after reading about the new organization in *Craftsman* magazine. Her Camp Fire Girls, soon joined by a younger group of Blue Birds, hiked, toured gold mines, and enjoyed all the activities of Camp Fire Girls in the states. They earned honors in each of Camp Fire's seven crafts, helped raise funds for the public library, and presented an ambitious musical and dramatic program to the Juneau community.

In June 1914, Kempthorne traveled from Alaska to Ames, Iowa, for the first Camp Fire guardians' training. There she met Luther Halsey Gulick and his daughter, Frances. Luther Halsey Gulick is said to have greeted Kempthorne with "Well, here's Alaska," and she continued to be known as "Alaska" among Camp Fire Girls and Camp Fire alumnae for the next six decades.

From Iowa, Kempthorne traveled to Maine and spent the summer as a counselor at the Gulicks' camp, Wohelo, on Lake Sebago, returning to Juneau in September 1914. In October, Frances Gulick joined Kempthorne and offered dancing lessons to Juneau's children and adults, besides assisting with Camp Fire activities.

More than fifty girls between the ages of eight or nine and eighteen had participated in Juneau's Camp Fire and Blue Bird groups between October 1913 and May 1915. Now, seventeen of them were off for a real camping adventure. The seventeen girls included two Blue Birds, twelve-year-old Frances Nowell, whose father had helped arrange the girls' trip with a reduced fare on the steamer, and thirteen-year-old Nadja Kashaveroff. Kempthorne and Gulick were assisted by a nurse, Elsie Cowley. The fourth woman was Frances Nowell's mother, who stayed at a hotel in Sitka and visited the camp each day.

A photograph of the camp shows a clearing in the woods with a large round teepee in the center and several totem poles. On the left is a row of five smaller army-style tents. On the right, slightly behind the teepee, are a larger tent with a stovepipe, probably the mess tent, and another smaller tent. Girls in bloomers and middies stand and sit near the tents. Kempthorne described the Sitka camp as "on the site of an old Battle ground in Sitka," which they approached through "tall totem poles." The camp's location, then called Indian River Point, is now part of Sitka National Historical Park.

The *Vacation Book of Camp Fire Girls* provided equipment lists, menu suggestions and ideas for camp activities, which helped the girls plan their camp. According to the *Vacation Book*, “The army blanket is ideal for camping, as the dark color prevents the dirt from showing. Since the dirt is healthful dirt, it is not necessary to go to the trouble of keeping the blankets white and clean in the woods as at home” (Camp Fire Girls, 1914). The girls enjoyed a number of interesting hikes, visited the government experiment station and the Pioneers’ Home, and climbed Mt. Verstovia. Miss Cowley provided first aid instruction; they also held ceremonials and on the last night enjoyed a dance hosted by the boys of Sitka.

The group returned to Juneau on June 5, and the *Alaska Daily Empire* announced that the camp had been a success. For some of the girls, the Sitka camp provided their first trip away from home, their first real boat trip, and probably their first camping trip (1915). Girls growing up in Alaska’s first American city had participated in the territory’s first girls’ camp.

References

Camp Fire Girls. (1914). *Vacation book of the Camp Fire Girls*. New York, NY: National headquarters.

(1915, June 5). Camp Fire Girls return from Sitka camp. *Alaska Daily Empire*.

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