

Eleanor's Vignettes



Eleanor P. Eells continues her series of sketches on some of the pioneers in camping. Mrs. Eells, a social worker, is known internationally for her efforts on behalf of camping.

The early days of the Civil War aroused a romantic patriotism in the North, with tales of brave men and heroic deeds in defense of the Union. The stirring lines of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the beat of drums and marching feet echoed in every town and village. Instant television reporting was almost a century away and the cruelty, horror, and waste of war were slow to strike home. The excitement reached the boys at the Gunnery School in Connecticut who dreamed of a chance to march and camp out in tents or sleep on the ground as did the soldiers. Frederick William Gunn, the headmaster, was receptive to the idea, for he believed that vigorous hiking and year-round sports strengthened not merely muscle, nerve, and self-discipline, but developed a muscular character as well.

In *Master of the Gunnery*, an 1887 biography of Gunn, alumni described the weekend trips "longed for in the fervent spirit with which the Moham-medan thinks of Paradise. . . . On many a Friday night did we traverse the two long hills toward the lake to rest in

mysterious silence till the early dawn found us at the fishing grounds. . . . As boys we felt in all the sports and trips only direct pleasure. The Master's deep plan of character structure, now revealed to our maturer sight, was masked then. . . . the hazards, emergencies, and challenges were the symbols of a system whose fruition lay in a solid self-reliant manhood."

Gunn saw value in the boys' eagerness to live a soldier's life and with his wife took the whole school on a two-week trip at the end of the school year in August 1861. The 40-mile journey to Welch's Point on Long Island Sound took two days. Most of the boys hiked, but there were two donkeys in the caravan for aid to any young novices. A market wagon carried the tents and supplies, with a carriage for Mrs. Gunn and her companions.

According to Gunn's philosophy the party lived simply and did their own cooking and chores (another reference, however, mentions a cook). The boys enjoyed the swimming in the surf, active sports, fishing, and games, with songs and stories by the campfire at night.

An alumnus recalls how the news from the "seat of war" affected the boys. The joyful word of a Union victory followed by word of defeat and panic turned elation to boyish defiance. No one who camped that year by the sea will ever forget the lines "I have seen Him in the watch fires of an hundred circling camps—Our God is marching on!"

This was such a "delightful and helpful experience" that Gunn arranged two later encampments in 1863 and 1865, of similar pattern. From what we know of Gunn's philosophy and his use of the "teachable moment" we might infer that there were also times of serious discussion of the issues which led to war and what lay ahead for young patriots and their country, but I can find no reference.

Annual encampments continued at Lake Waramaug, seven miles from the school till 1879 when the summer session and the camp were eliminated. Gunn's daughter reported that "old boys came back to join the merry troop, and with friends of the school, some of them ladies, made up a party of 60 and more on subsequent trips." For many years thereafter alumni used the site as a vacation and reunion sport to renew school ties and recall fond memories.

History is hard to come by because records were poorly kept by the founders and their contemporaries, and for too long there was no central repository. We are indebted to Porter Sargent for retrieval of much early information including Ernest Balch and Camp Chocuroa, "the first Camp." Eugene Lehman had a keen interest in history, and in the early days of camping. In preparing an article for the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on "Camping Out," he found references to the Gunnery School. He followed these clues (A detective talent is a must in history.) and corresponded with the headmaster of the Gunnery, and through him, with Mrs. John Brinsmade, Gunn's daughter. His findings are reported in "Camps and Camping"—1929 edition of *Spalding Athletic Library*.

Sargent accepted these findings, as did H. W. Gibson later in his "History of Camping," "until someone else traces the story further back." The question has been raised as to whether this was really a camp since it was a part of the school term and not for profit. Mrs. Brinsmade maintained that Gunnery was the first camp, organized and operated 15 seasons before the founding of Chocuroa in 1881. She also reported that the Gunnery was founded in the fall of 1849 by her parents as a home boarding school for 10 boys over 12 years old. In ten years the number gradually increased to 70 boarders and

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a large number of day pupils.

With the diversity of camps throughout our history, who can really define what is a camp and what is another form of outdoor experience?

~~Curriculum Development committee has painstakingly reviewed the competencies and methods of~~

Who was the first is of less importance than the impact made by a new approach to experiential learning. The alumni records demonstrate the deep impression made by Gunnery Camp on the participants, as well as on the faculty and others interested in supplements to formal education.

A.S. Gregg Clarke, the father of Camp Keewaydin (1894-), was a student for eight years at the Gunnery

School just as the camp closed, so he never attended. However, Gunn's philosophy, methods, and concern for his boys had made so deep an impression on Clarke that he turned to camping and the outdoor life on his graduation from Harvard in 1893. For several years he taught at the Gunnery and the Gunnery ideals stayed with

him. Gunnery boys became early Keewaydin campers and Gunnery faculty his camp leaders.

Keewaydin was originally a tripping and wilderness camp demanding and building stamina, group cooperation, and loyalty. Abbott T. Fenn has told the story of the beginning and development of the eight camps up to

1959 in "The Story of Keewaydin." Still to be written is the account of the past 20 years of this oldest private camp in America which continued to adapt to changing times and needs, still keeping its early heritage and founding principles. □