

# Eleanor's Vignettes

Eleanor Eells

## "Cap'n Bill" Vinal

Any attempt to portray Cap'n Bill in a Vignette is like trying to keep a genie compressed in a bottle. He was described as intelligent, whimsical, personable, innovative, and always unconventional with a lively imagination. At his best in a small group, he taught by asking questions and exploring every clue before giving any answers. In his delightful autobiography he tells of his formative years and what led to his concept of nature recreation and his life-long concern about the relationship of people and the environment:

I was born in 1891 in a Cape Cod-style house 201 years after it was built. I was fortunate enough to be born poor and on a farm. I firmly believe that farm chores, caring for plants and animals, and doing one's share in the garden is fundamental to cooperative family enterprise.

Vinal received his teaching credentials at the Bridgewater Normal School in 1903 before entering Harvard where he received his BA in biological science in 1906 and his MA the next year. Five summers were spent in further study and fieldwork with the Massachusetts Fish and Game Commission (doing research at the Wellfleet Lab). "Ecology was a New Religion. I had never heard the word in greater Boston. Cape Cod became the promised land (and water). Pickled biology went out the window."

His vision took form at Wellfleet, where he founded Camp Chequesset, a small "Nautical Camp for Knotty girls." The campers were "the chosen people—to live in Eden." Here Vinal became Cap'n Bill, with the campers as crew and the counselors as coxswains.

There were trips to heron rookeries with Henry Howe Forbush, state ornithologist, and a visit to the hermit on Dyer's Pond. The new Comstock-Vinal looseleaf notebook was used to study the hermit's environment. The girls gathered wild berries, seaweed for blanchmange, shells and sweep grass for crafts; listened to yarns by Capt. Stull, "the Ambergris King"; sang sea chanteys with Capt. Stull and Capt. King and visited fish weirs. They took gypsy hikes with topo map and

compass; collected and shaped driftwood for a camp xylophone; and each day kept the ship's log. Even ship's time was by bells, as was the raising of the flag.

World War I prevented any development of the camp, but the Vinals had invested all their money and dreams at Chequesset and there they stayed. By the fifth season there were 34 girls and a day camp for girls from the village. They earned money by hoeing the garden and digging clams to sell (a nature recreation program).

Here at Chequesset in 1918 the New England Federation of Natural History Societies held its three-day "camp out." Cape Cod was still unspoiled, and they saw it as Thoreau had on his dramatic field trip down the Cape. This was the forerunner of the Nature Lore School, for here too, in June 1921 the National Association of Directors of Girls Camps (NADGC) held the first of seven counselor training courses. Cap'n Bill had harassed the camp directors at a Boston meeting, egged-on by Luther Gulick. "Nature Counselors need training. They are awful!"

To avoid any taint of the classroom, Vinal used the term "nature lore" to describe the kind of knowledge one gains by experience. Porter Sargent commented (1925 Handbook), "Chequesset has been filled with the spirit of service, and is doing much for the summer camp movement."

Vinal was president of the NADGC in 1923-24 and the second president of the merged CDA in 1925-26. When Vinal was later asked how he came by his nature lore knowledge and philosophy, he replied, "just by living by the river."

He wrote frequently for *Camping* and for popular and scientific magazines as well as a monthly column for the *Cosmopolitan*. He once commented that he had written more mileage on camping than on any other subject.

Training for camp staff was assuming a new importance, and in this he played a major role throughout his life. The problem as Vinal saw it, was to make nature study an adventure of discovery and appreciation rather than an unpopular exercise in collecting specimens for identification, using

scientific terminology. Vinal was a master in the use of the teachable moment, and of amusing anecdotes or bird calls to illustrate a point. His philosophy and methods were advanced for his time and slow to find acceptance.

In 1920 he and Lawrence Palmer joined Dr. E. K. Fretwell of Columbia Teachers College in presenting the first of seven annual auxiliary courses for camp directors. Outstanding leaders such as Fay Welch, forestry expert, flutist, and photographer; Dan Beard, dressed in buckskins and throwing his hatchet; Julian Salomon with his vast store of Indian lore; and "Uncle Bennie" Hyde of the Museum of Natural History all assisted in the work of camping at Palisades Park, NY. This followed the weekly classes held in New York City—"frosting on the cake."

Every summer was fully occupied, first at Camp Chequesset, and then as a nature guide or ranger at Yosemite, Glacier Park, or Crater Lake, Oregon. In the summer of 1927, Cap'n Bill and his wife, "Mother V," visited a camp a day in New York and New England to put on nature programs that were sponsored by the CDA and the American Nature Association.

That fall he became head of the science department of the school of education at Case-Western Reserve in Cleveland. During his eight-year tenure, he developed fieldwork programs that provided experience and job training in addition to special six-week courses in ornithology, entomology, and nature lore. He was active in the 1935 CDA convention in Cleveland at which the ACA was officially established and the new programs under President Twining formulated.

After the depression had forced the closing of these programs in June 1935, he joined the National Recreation Association, giving two-week training courses in every big city in the U.S. After two years he resigned because the time was too short to do adequate training.

In 1939 he was appointed head of the Department of Biological Field Studies at the University of Massachusetts (Amherst). This title was a faculty attempt to give academic dignity to Vinal's program, for "nature recreation" would be viewed as a play course and "nature study" would be juvenile. Vinal thought that all this was "asinine," but he "didn't mind being called anything if it wasn't insulting." The students called it the REC anyway.

He had enjoyed his previous teaching experiences, considered teaching his true vocation, and remained at Amherst until his retirement in 1959. In the 1940s he spent part of several summers

(continued on next page)



# DOWN DAY

... anymore than you must  
for this year's advertising.

Many publication rates have  
already risen and no doubt many  
more will follow regularly.

There's no better time to take  
advantage of the MEDIA HOUSE  
discount plan on any commis-  
sionable publication in which  
you are now advertising.

**We offer rates at 7.5% below  
the publisher's rates**

(those you are now probably paying)—without loss  
of any advertising agency service you're used to  
receiving. That's a 50% saving on agency commission.  
Call us at (203) 762-0643; we'll tell you more and  
give you the best of references.

**AGENCY SERVICES:** Copy, Layout, Finished Art, Marketing,  
Media Strategy, Sales Promotion, Production, Publicity

## Media House

20 BLACK ALDER LANE WILTON, CONN. 06897 (203) 762-0643

Circle 3 on Reader Inquiry Card

MEDIA HOUSE, LTD.  
20 BLACK ALDER LANE, WILTON, CT 06897

Of course I want to save money on my advertising. Please  
let me have more information.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Title \_\_\_\_\_

Camp \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

in charge of the Nature Guide School  
at Life Camps with Lloyd Sharp.

He and Mother V. returned to his  
ancestral home to spend many fruitful  
years until his death in 1977. He wrote  
and lectured occasionally—and helped  
start the Nature Center at Norwell and  
assembled materials about his life and  
work for the James Library. The  
January 1975 issue of *Nature Study* is  
devoted to his memoirs, and includes  
many honors and tributes from former  
students and colleagues.

Though he is perhaps best known in  
the field of outdoor education, his in-  
fluence on camping was, and is, pro-  
found. He was active in the stormy,  
early formative years; his writings and  
training methods continue to be useful  
as his philosophy and methods are  
carried around the country by his  
students and their students. □

Acknowledgement to Waldo Stone  
and Helen Williams for a taped inter-  
view in 1974; to Reg Carlson and  
Phyllis Ford for reminiscences and  
anecdotes; to Ramona Curtis for her  
research on Vinal and camping; and to  
the American Nature Study  
Association.

## You can get up to: 40,000 of LIFE INSURANCE at low group rates

- Research in Camping Association sponsors an Insurance  
Trust for the benefit of all camp directors, their associates  
and employees.
- Your application for insurance automatically grants you  
membership in RICA. No dues required.
- Fill in and mail this coupon for additional information or  
call (212) 688-2600 and ask for Mr. Rosner.

Circle 4 on Reader Inquiry Card

**TRUSTEES: J. B. Newton and O. K. Rosahn**

To: RICAIT  
C/O G. Rosner  
575 Lexington Avenue  
New York, NY 10022

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER/7