

Eleanor's Vignettes



Eleanor P. Eells, one of organized camping's great personalities, in this issue begins a series of sketches on some of the pioneers in the American camping movement. Mrs. Eells is a social worker, known internationally for her efforts on behalf of camping. She is one of the founders of the Fund for Advancement of Camping in Chicago. She has been honored with many awards including ACA's Distinguished Service Award.

Camping was a man's world until the turn of the century, and neither safe nor appropriate for well brought up young women. Four great names stand out in the early history of girls' private camps: the Gulick families (Luther and Edward), the C.E. Cobbs, and Laura Mattoon. For this vignette I have chosen Laura Mattoon of Camp Kehonka as an "activist and innovator who never leveled off." Her contribution to camping and to the struggling young Camp Directors Association and ACA merits recognition today.

A Wellesley graduate of 1894, Laura Mattoon taught in private girls in Massachusetts and New York. At a time when classrooms were formal and rigid, she was friendly, informal, and concerned with the interests and personal growth of her students. Early hiking and camping trips with her family in Canada led her to take a few students into the wilds of West-

chester County on weekends. This led to the 1902 expedition with eight older girls to spend the summer in the New Hampshire wilderness.

Camping in the virgin forest was literally natural and down-to-earth, with earthen floors for tents, beds of balsam boughs in rough log frames, and simplistic outdoor plumbing. Wood had to be chopped for cooking and water carried. Self-contained community living offered ample opportunity to learn by doing.

To think that the myth of early camping as "just recreation" or only "fun and games" persists to this day! There was time to swim, to explore the miles of uninhabited shoreline, the open countryside, and to climb the mountain trails. The geology of the area provided a fascinating field for study. Without the distraction of electric lights, the girls gathered around the camp fire at night for stories, poetry, and a part in their leader's sparkling conversation.

Before the days of counselors, she guided the activities of the entire group. Clay for ceramics was found in an abandoned brickyard. Abundant natural resources and Laura Mattoon's aesthetic sense laid a foundation for the arts at Kehonka.

When the group went into the village for supplies, they were objects of curiosity, even ridicule. As a practical matter, Miss Mattoon wore "bifurcated garments" and dressed in manly style though she was essentially feminine. She ignored criticism in crusading for simplified clothing for women.

The first summer's experiment was so successful that each succeeding year saw a larger group of campers, the need for additions to land, buildings, and by 1909 a male maintenance crew. A tent office on stilts, a cow, and a single-seater swayback buckboard with a horse called "Paul Revere," were cherished additions. Counselors came later!

Miss Mattoon was firmly committed to the camping ideal and

remained at Kehonka until her death in 1946. For 10 years she served as secretary of the National Association of Directors of Girls Private Camps, and four more years as secretary of the merged Camp Directors Association. When "unruly individualism" threatened to disrupt a meeting and even the existence of the association, she was a skillful diplomat, remaining friendly with all.

She wrote "Services for the Open," long used by camps throughout the world. A testimonial parchment was presented at the Chicago Convention for her contribution to the advancement of camping and the association.

She was a gracious lady, skilled in the fine art of group living. She lived fully in the present and gave freely to her campers and colleagues. But her face was turned to the future in anticipation of what it might hold for her girls and what they might contribute.

She understood well the place women were to occupy in the twentieth century and the many ways in which the camp experience could be a preparation. Her ideas about camping, education, and a woman's role were in advance of her time. They were not always understood or accepted, but later they influenced significantly the course of all three.

Space forbids a further account of Laura Mattoon and Kehonka over the years. The full story is told in "Wings of Imagination," an unpublished manuscript by A. Cooper Ballentine, who came to Kehonka as a youth of 17. He became director after Miss Mattoon's retirement, a post he still ably holds.

*Acknowledgement
I am indebted to Mr. and Mrs. A. Cooper Ballentine, Directors of Camp Kehonka for permission to quote from the 75th Anniversary issues of "Goose Quills." They have graciously made available personal notes and materials from the early days of Kehonka.*