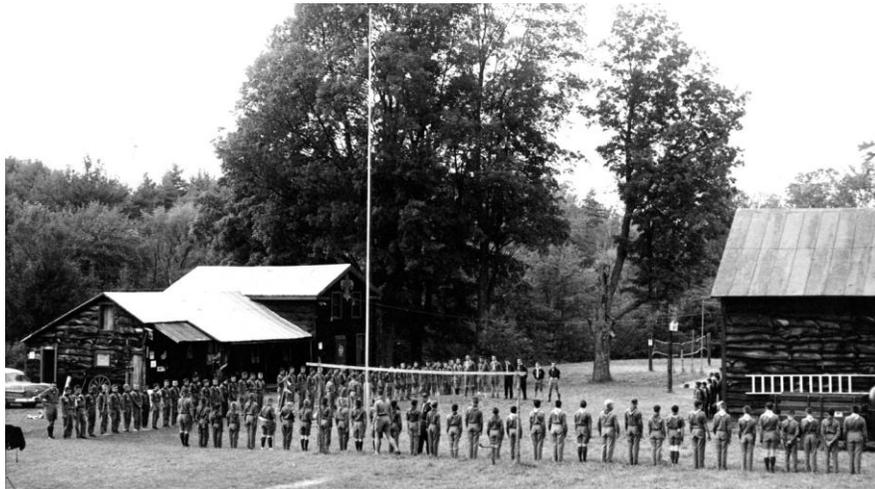


This Week in Saratoga County History

Boy Scout's Camp Saratoga

Submitted by Gene Phillips September 28, 2022

Gene Phillips grew up on Mount McGregor and owned a consulting engineering firm in Saratoga Springs. He has a lifelong association with the Boy Scouts of America, serving in positions with local Troop 24, Twin Rivers Council, early 1960's summer camp counselor, and is interested in local scout history.



Camp Saratoga, 1960 Retreat

Camping has been the backbone of the Boy Scout program since its inception. The national Boy Scouts of America kick started its organization with a 2-week summer camp at the YMCA's Silver Bay facility on Lake George in August 1910. BSA commissioned its first scoutmaster - S.F.Lester, Troy N.Y.. - Sept. 10,1910. Lester brought his troop to summer camp at the Vermont YMCA camp in 1911.

Many early Saratoga County troops established their own summer camps such as Mechanicville on Assembly Point Lake George 1921 and Burden Lake 1922. Troop 1 Ballston Spa hiked to summer camp at White Sulpher Springs, Saratoga Lake in 1922.

Saratoga County Council was organized in 1924. The Executive Board's top priority was acquiring property for the Council's summer camp. The search reviewed properties in Luther Forest, Corinth, Stillwater and others. The search continued as the Executive Board authorized Troops to use Albany Council's Camp Hawley for summer camp in 1925, 26, 27, and 28. Saratoga County Council's first summer camp was held in 1929 at American Manufacturing Company's

employee recreation property on Fish Creek near Grangerville. The camp was called Camp Saratoga although not on the property to become known later as Camp Saratoga.

Saratoga County Council's executive board finalized the property search on April 24, 1930 purchasing 290 acres of the Gick family farm near Gansevoort for \$3,000, which came with two buildings, the farmhouse and barn. The property had no electricity. Water came from a manual well pump at the farmhouse. Sanitation facilities consisted of a single pit type "outhouse" attached to the farmhouse. The property had extensive fields devoid of trees. Deegan stream had a dam creating a very small shallow pond.

Scouting's spring 1930 expansion of property facilities included construction of a \$1,700 mess hall complete with shallow well. The small pond's \$700 expansion included a sandy beach and diving board. Mechanized machinery was not available. Harnessed horses removed stumps, dredged, and expanded the pond. All was complete in time for the July 1930 summer camp start, running for 3 periods (6 weeks) serving 129 scouts.

Fall of 1930 saw the community step up its scouting commitment. The Lions Club of Saratoga, Mechanicville Rotary Club and others sponsored construction of seven "cabins" on the hill, enclosing five by 1932. The Ballston Spa Rotary Club provided one enclosed cabin including a fireplace. The "Bears Den", as it was known, allowed winter camping in December 1932. Hilltop cabins received the camp's second "latrine" in 1933.

Forestation of the farms grazing fields was an early objective of the council. 5,000 white pine and 5,000 red pine saplings were planted by scouts in 1930. Substantial plantings by scouts continued for many years (21,000 total by 1934) into the 1960's.

An "Indian Teepee Village" was established for summer camp in 1933. The village housed 12 senior scouts for a Native American program. The remaining 48 scouts in camp were housed in the Hilltop Cabins. A single "lean-to" replaced the Indian Village in 1936. The lean-to was removed in 2014.

The 1933 spring "Pow-Wow" was the first camporee at Camp Saratoga. Earlier "Pow-Wow's" were held at the Saratoga Battlefield.

Continual improvements were instituted over the years. The rifle range was added in 1935, Rabbit Hole in 1941. The pig pen was moved to a remote location in 1939, thereby reducing the "fly problem". Electricity was added in 1945 along with telephone service. Cooks cabin, IP Lodge, chapel, health lodge, ranger cabin, pond shower building, dining hall extension, IP shower building, and others were added in the 1960's/70's. The Rabbit Hole was expanded by attaching one of the hilltop cabins. Water was first distributed to tent sites in the late 1960's.

Individual troops were allowed to develop dedicated camp sites beginning in 1941. 1984 saw the first troop "lean-to" built, followed by others. Tent campsites at North Tent, Hilltop and South Tent served multiple units.

Maintenance of the camp was largely done by volunteers. Membership in the "Beaver Club; "Beaverettes" and "Beaver Scout" being cherished indications of contributed hours. Order of the Arrow spring inductions provided needed service to open summer camp.

Income was generated for the council thru "ice harvesting" and selected logging. True "ice boxes" were required to preserve camp food prior to 1945's electrification. An ice house was located behind the Ranger Cabin. Ice was transported to Gansevoort, loaded on trains for distribution. Local vendors/residents came to camp to purchase ice.

Summer camp was the cornerstone of a Scout's career. Advancement; merit badges in natural sciences - forestry, botany to bird study; aquatic badges; pioneering; handicrafts; marksmanship; archery. Scout skills such as hiking, camping, cooking; off site badges in horsemanship and forestry. Mile swim, BSA lifeguard, NRA awards. Something for everyone.

Some merit badges - including some required for Eagle such as swimming and lifesaving - were only available to many scouts at summer camp. A highlight of any scout week was the opportunity to demonstrate scout skills on Family Night during the weekly water carnival. Scouts demonstrated their new ability to swim. They competed in swimming races and relays, diving, boating races, and the lost art of canoe gunneling etc. Those who took a swim prior to breakfast each day earned the coveted Polar Bear patch. Brrr!

Off site trips to Mt. McGregor (hiking and/or camping) and Schenectady Council's Camp Rotary on Lake George for intercouncil competitions and hikes up Sleeping Beauty mountain were all part of the experience. Off camp treks were held to Mt. Marcy (1987) and Mt. Haystack (1988).

The Rabbit Hole, Bears Den, and IP Lodge created memorable experiences in Winter camping allowing scouts to complete year-round camping awards. Spring camporees featured the annual OA tapout with the scenic canoe entrance of OA chief Allowat Sakima in full regalia across Delegan pond.

Who can forget the many veteran scouters - Ed Thielmann, Harry Hayward, Victor Parmenter; Camp Directors John McCarty, Dick Reeves, Bob Wicks, Allen Remaley, Charles Baker, Fred Cable, and others. Camp Rangers Ray Gates, Larry Gordon, Mike Shaver, Paul Woschanko.

Memories Forever

