OUR BEGINNING YEARS AT CAMP BIRD

Camp Bird for our WELS upper grade children was the brainchild of Delmar Brick, then pastor at Mt. Calvary in Kimberly, and the undersigned, then pastor at Riverview in Appleton. It happened like this. The previous summer, 1951, our family visited a camp for WELS children at Whitewater State Park near Winona, Minnesota. My wife's brother, then pastor in Columbus, Wisconsin, had been serving at this camp as the dean and had invited us to visit while camp was in session. That visit sold us on the idea. We shared our positive impressions of this experience with the Bricks and resolved to investigate the possibilities of doing something similar for the young folks in our general Fox Valley and Winnebago Lake area. Some inquiries that same summer brought to our attention a Camp Bird in Marinette County operated by that county in behalf of local youth groups and under the general supervision of the county's forest ranger, John Saemann. We lost no time in making a quick visit with our spouses to Camp Bird and, of course, were highly impressed by what we saw, an ideal facility for what we were hoping to do. At a subsequent meeting with Mr. Saemann at his office in Marinette, however, we were informed that all the summer weeks at the camp were solidly booked and that chances for an opening for us were realistically nil; yet, he would keep us in mind if a week should become available.

The following spring, to our great surprise, we received a letter from the forest ranger, which informed that a week was available for us in mid August of 1952. Going out on a hook, we responded immediately, probably by telephone, and committed ourselves to reserving the week at the rental price of, possibly, $200; and it was no trick at all to sell the idea to our constituent congregations. At a Sunday afternoon meeting at Riverview during the Easter Season with the pastors within a fifty mile radius of Appleton we broached the camp idea, and they all, without exception, assured us of their full support to advertise the camp to their congregations. Then, with the help of information gained from the visit to Camp Whitewater, the two of us went to work making plans and setting up rules and policies for operating Camp Bird for the children in the upper grades of our Christian day schools. One Marinette County stipulation for use of their camp was that a certain percentage of the children – it could have been 10% or 20% - had to be residents of their county. Thus, from the beginning, it was part of our policy to grant those children registration priority. The per child fee for the week at camp, which included all service and all food, was set, to the best of my recollection, at $25. Registration of campers would begin at 4 P.M. on the first Sunday of the week, and the camp would be clear of everyone by 2 P.M. the following Sunday. Excepting the children from Marinette County, registrations would be honored on a first-some-first-serve basis, the postmarked letter often deciding priorities because, from the beginning, the number of registrants always exceeded camp capacity.

As for rules and policies, no radios were permitted on location; we wanted everyone to be totally separated from the world around us. There would be no canteen; all treats and snacks, handed out three times a day, would be gratis, built into the fee. Service, not money making, was our business. There would be a schedule of religious instruction at the beginning of each day, after which the campers would be divided into groups taking

turns at singing sessions, doing crafts, phy ed exercises of all sorts, and going on a nature hike. There would also be a required rest hour every day after the noon meal. Swimming, canoeing, boating, and water sports would occupy the later afternoons, and the buddy system would help insure that all swimmers were accounted for. The after-supper entertainment would include movies - often the just newly released Walt Disney nature movies, not only educational but often humorous - , games, and a talent night. Four of us staff members also performed as a barbershop quartet. If it rained during the day, our imaginative phy ed instructors always came up with an emergency program. Each day began with a devotion at breakfast and each day closed with a vesper service in the outdoor amphitheater down by the lake. A special hymn, "Lord, We Thank You for Camp Bird," had been composed by Pastor Brick's wife, Ione, and was always sung at the close of vespers. On the last day of camp, the final Sunday, after the week's last meal, the breakfast, every person in camp, the children together with the entire junior and senior staff, as part of the required annual routine, gave all the buildings a thorough cleaning and checked the grounds for any litter. We were determined to leave a good impression on the county authorities. Then followed a regular Sunday worship service either in the dining room or the outdoor amphitheater, attended also by many of the parents coming to pick up their children.

The very newness of the Camp Bird venture helped to make it and keep it a resounding success through all four years of our experience. Pastor Brick, with relatives in the food preparation and food service business in his hometown of Manitowoc and with a knack for getting good discount deals on high quality food, took charge of all responsibilities connected with food supply, the undersigned with general administration and personnel. We were consistently fortunate in securing the help of willing workers for both our senior staff and our junior staff of counselors. The latter came from congregation students at local public high schools, there being as yet no Lutheran high schools in the near area, and from our seminary and synodical colleges. On the senior staff, our camp dean the first year was Harold Wicke, then pastor at Weyauwega, later editor of the Northwestern Lutheran. Later deans were Prof. Hilton Oswald then at Northwestern College and George Lillegard, principal at our school in Wrightstown. The dean supervised the daily schedule of the campers and conducted the singing classes. Waldemar Gieschen, then pastor in Manitowoc, taught the religion classes. Claude Radtke, high school phy ed teacher, was our life guard and with Pauline Gaertner, phy ed teacher at the Neenah high school, did the phy ed programs. Bernice Leinwander, teacher at St. Paul's, Appleton, was in charge of the crafts. Harold Steinke, member at Grace, Oshkosh and public high school biology teacher, led and lectured on the nature hikes. He also built the little fire in the pit of the amphitheater to add color to the vespers. Evelyn, widowed spouse of Arizona missionary Allen Schuppenhauer, served as nurse. Helping in a kind of jack-of-all-trades capacity was Win Nommenson, then pastor at Sugar Bush and who later took over as camp director, The head cook was Julia Falck, member of Trinity, Neenah, who with her sister and a friend did a superb job of readying three meals a day which were not only adequate but also of exceptionally high quality.. They were assisted by our wives, Ione Brick and Lois Hartwig, and other wives of senior staff who were available,

Aside from the three main cooks, who were kept busy at their work from before dawn to after supper and to whom we wanted to show appreciation with more than a nominal gratuity, all other staff members, except for their travel expenses, willingly gave their time and service without remuneration. What few monies remained after the camp week were plowed back into the kitty and when, after two or three years, that amount reached a sizable level of $200 or $300, a contribution was made to some WELS charity.

We experienced but one traumatic event during the four years of our administration. That came in 1953 when polio was running at full tide and the Salk vaccine had not yet been discovered. Are we courting danger by operating camp this summer? Some very few parents thought so and advised against it. Consultation with medical doctors thought otherwise and we were urged not to cancel, yet with the precaution that every day we take the temperatures of all the children. So we purchased more thermometers, established a temperature-taking routine which kept the nurse busier than before, and came through the week, thankfully, without mishap.

The more-than-busy days from sunrise to bedtime would normally close, after the campers were in bed and hopefully asleep after a full day, with camaraderie of all senior and older junior staff members in the dining room, reviewing the day's unusual experiences, swapping stories, and being regaled with jokes. Then, for some of us, a last midnight dip in the lake and so off to bed. Needless to say, the four years of our time at Camp Bird are never-to-be-forgotten. They were rich and rewarding for all of us. We could never be grateful enough that the camp had been made available to us and for the children of our congregations. It is, of course, equally gratifying that this venture, begun in August of 1952, is still going strong and has increased in point of weeks fifty years later.

Ted Hartwig

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