

GIVE CAMPING BACK TO THE CAMPERS

By

L. B. Sharp

Executive Director, Life Camps, Inc. and
Director of National camp.
Special Lecturer at New York University

This is a very pertinent and intriguing subject. It implies two things: first, that at one time the campers have had camping and second, that it has been taken away from them. Perhaps all of these points are true in part. I would not want to assert that campers throughout the country have never had any camping nor would I be willing to say that they have had all of it. Take it any way you please, the important consideration here is not best to give it back to them.

What do we mean by camping? A good clue is suggested in this true story. Early one morning a thirteen-year-old boy in one of our large cities left this note on his teacher's desk; "I am running away for three reasons – first, because I am tired of the drab sordid city life; second, because I want to be on my own for a while; third, I want to live out in nature for a while. I will be gone for about three weeks."

His inner urges were satisfied much sooner than he expected. But let us take this appeal to heart. Here is the basis of a camping program that appeals to youth and is basically sound. This boy had adventures--lived on his own--lived daringly and adventurously and explored and discovered things. The sad part of it is that he had to escape adults to do it. The voice of youth of our land cries out for work, adventure and action—they want to do worthwhile things—they have energy—we seem unable to provide sufficient or suitable opportunities to meet this need. A vigorous camping program suited to various ages of youth can help.

In my opinion camping by and large is too tame—not sufficiently vigorous to challenge and test out the inner qualities of ingenuity and resourcefulness dormant and abundant in most youth.

The odds are against city youth. They need space, opportunity to explore, grow and expand. We guard and protect them at every turn, perhaps unnecessarily, but nevertheless the effort is to cramp, stifle and soften. Youth can stand only so much of this, then comes some kind of exploration. The study of crime figures, resolution of protest at a business luncheon meeting or at parents meetings, laws by a city government, will not entirely solve the problem. Vigorous, exploratory, on-your-own types of camping can give camping back to enough youth.

The basic purpose of camping, however, should be concerned with the growth of the whole child. We should aim to secure the greatest amount and the most wholesome total personality growth and development within each child. To do this requires the most favorable camping atmosphere which includes a high quality and adequate leadership.

We can do so much to implement democracy by giving as much camping as possible back to the campers and to an increasing number of youth. But first, what do we mean by “Democracy?” In line with current thought and happenings it may be divided into two types—a true democracy and a false democracy.

False Democracy

We should beware of the earmarks of the false type. It argues in all its brands and brandishing’s that everyone should be brought to an average, irrespective of individual capacity and initiative. That means certain individuals with capacities above the average would be forced down and those who are below average in capacities would come up to the average in spite of their abilities. This is an insidious philosophy.

Keep in mind that as people become more crowded in large centers there is a greater tendency to control, coercion and authoritarianism. Do we find any traces of false democracy in our camps?

True Democracy

True democracy on the other hand says that each individual should be free and helped to reach the height of his capacity for service to his fellow man and his country, along with the ideals usually associated with the word.

The external signs of democracy are not so vital. We have perhaps made too much of them—allegiances, flag waving, salutes, and parading. They are at times important and we would not want to do without them. But we must not be fooled by them and think that when we parade or salute we necessarily have democracy. There may be sufficient signs of conformity, but no real inner understandings or convictions about it.

This inner thing is self control and is extremely valuable part of true democracy. It is, in fact, something so deep and significant we can well call it spiritual. It controls our inner thoughts, convictions and actions.

True democracy is something more than a majority vote. It is an awareness of individual personality and its development to the maximum degree.

What is the situation in our camps? How are we organized? What kind of democracy do we practice and how much? How can we reorganize our camps to secure the greatest amount of individual growth and development flow from our camps? Can we give more and more camping back to the campers?

Early American Life

A study of the struggle and living conditions of our early settlers gives us a basis for our camping program. They lived a life of daring and adventure. They were on their own as individuals and families. Out of their pattern of living was created our concept and form of democracy. It might be said that camping and democracy started together in this country. A careful study of their progress will show that shelter, food, self-occupation, spiritual influences, group living and community effort were basic elements in the development of our country. At the time of the signing of our American Constitution approximately ninety-eight percent of the people lived in a strictly rural area. Today about fifty-five percent of the people live in large cities and are necessarily subjected to much regimentation, coercion and regulation along with all their modern conveniences. It is not contended here that we should abandon our social and economic progress and go back to the days of the Pilgrims and early settlers. Not at all. It is

maintained, however, that these principles to which references has been made are as fundamental and necessary in our present day living as they ever were. Also, there is a better opportunity to experience them in a favorable camp situation.

Regimentation

We have far too much regimentation in our camps—more of it than we realize. Many do not desire it, but it grows around us without our realizing it. Most of it comes to our camps by the adoption of some pattern of organization from city life rather than adapting an ideal form of living to an outdoor words environment.

In most instances our camps are patterned after school or military systems or dominated by an athletic system of control. If we examine the type of organization in most camps we find it follows this school, military or athletic pattern.

Centralization or Decentralization

In the main, camps are organized on either a centralized or decentralized plan. Most of them are on the former. In these there are the traditional departments—crafts, music, dramatics, nature, and on around the circle. Each has a department head to teach the activities. Activity periods are offered for each and in varying degrees campers may choose their activities. You are well acquainted with the opportunities for patronage in each department and the conflicts which often prevent the consummation of the program of each department head.

The decentralized plan, on the other and better hand, does not have departments as such. Specialists, if they must be called that, are counselors and there is a larger percentage of them. Campers and counselors live in small groups—six to eight campers and two counselors with them. They have their own camp all to themselves. Their program is their own. They plan most of their own meals, secure the provisions from the camp store and keep their food costs. They then have the fund of cooking. The dietitian now takes the role of consultant to them. She is responsible only for the menus to be made for the central dining room. There is free and frequent inter-group exchange and visiting of staff which divides the special abilities of the staff to other campers. Their craft projects are chiefly those things required to enhance their needs and comforts. The

finer arts are stimulated to a greater degree and a greater percentage of the campers participates. They arise naturally and creatively out of their program of living and are not arranged by schedule.

This method of organization is known as the campativity procedure. An activity is a skill or subject separately taught, while campativity comprises numerous skills used to accomplish a larger objective—something related to the camper's comfort, welfare or happiness.

Basis for Camp Living

If we wish to teach youth to love the out-of-doors and the woods naturally, it can best be done by living in the woods as much as possible. Briefly stated, there are five major emphases basic to the campativity procedure of the decentralized type of camp: Shelter: There should be various types of shelters. Campers should share in designing, building, altering and keeping them in repair. Man has always had an urge to put a roof over his head. Youth likes to build, work and create, especially when they can enjoy the benefits quickly.

Food: Campers should share as much as possible in planning their menus under proper guidance. They should know what various items cost—how to care for food and how to cook. We should take full advantage of this fine education opportunity. Campers cannot learn much about these problems when the dietitian does it all. They can do it and like to do it.

Self Occupation: Each small camp should work out its own program. Under wise and careful counselor guidance they should and can assume the most of this responsibility. A centralized program, no matter how many choices are given, does not develop the powers of self direction comparable to the small group plan.

Spiritual Uplift: A fuller knowledge and deeper understanding of nature causes one to dip deeper into the realms of things spiritual. A part of the spiritual influence is found in this poem written by camper Joe True at Life Camp Pole Bridge last summer:

What is the night?
A dark and fearsome thing
That causes us to tremble,

To bend our knees,
And pray for light?

Ah me! 'tis beauty
'Tis beauty born of peace
And rest from daily strife,
A part of eternity
Is the beauty of the night

Group Relationship: Living in small groups together campers and two counselors intensifies individual relationship and interdependence. Little things count for and are more readily observed and evaluated by camper and counselor alike.

Public School Camps

I have long been advocate of the idea that schools should conduct camping as an integral part of the educational system. Therefore, let us also give camping to schools.

City children seldom come in direct contact with nature, the fields, streams, mountains, animals and flowers. Also, they have little experience in living on their own, getting shelter, obtaining food and cooking their own meals, as well as determining their own occupations, providing their own comfort and welfare, meeting adversities of weather, and exploring and adventuring in nature on their own. Their range of country experience is extremely limited and consequently they often do not comprehend what they study in their school books. It would seem, therefore, that a program of living in an isolated environment, away from the humdrum of the city and its adult-made laws and regimentation, for a part of a child's life, is a sensible and necessary provision in our newer education of tomorrow.

Ways can be found for school and camp-trained teachers to learn and teach in camps, with valuable educational results. A month in camp (counting waking hours) is equal to forty six percent of the time that a child spends in the city schools in an entire ten-month school year—a sizable opportunity for learning.

This pioneering venture is a new kind of adventure, asking it possible for boys and girls to have, as a part of the regular school curriculum, opportunities to solve their own questions posed by life outdoors. If camping is so sound educationally, it is not asking too much that the equivalent of at least four years out of twelve be spent in favorable camping experiences.

The need for trained leaders in camping is most important. It is with much satisfaction that I announce we have started the National Camp for the training of advance leadership—a summer session course, July 9 to August 19, in which New York University will cooperate.

It has been proposed in these remarks that camping be given back to the campers; that to do so is what youth needs and desires; that the campers' decentralized plan accomplishes these aims more effectively and results in a better implementation of democracy.

Come what will, we must not neglect our youth. They will assume increasing burdens as they grow. The best training is to practice the art of caring for themselves, providing for their own comforts, welfare and happiness under wise and patient guidance. We should see to it that as many youth as possible get out on grass this summer.