

WHEN A CAMP GOES STALE...WHAT WE CAN DO

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Perhaps I am somewhat in the position of the young attorney who, when he was getting ready to appear before the bar to make his plea, was advised as follows: "Before pleading your case, if you are short of facts, then you talk to the judge; if you are short of your legal side, then you talk to the jury; and, if you are short of both, just pound hell out of the table. I may do a little bit of all three.

What shall we do when the camp program goes stale? Of course, the first answer would be - don't let it go stale. But actually, it is not quite as simple as all that. Here are a few samples, in brief, of program spicing I have seen or have heard explained to me. At the outset let me say they are unsound, unwise and show lack of thoughtful planning of a program of camping.

1. (1) A fake robbery was staged in a camp and the cash box was stolen from the office. Who did it? The finger-print experts of the camp were called in. All clues were chased down and it took a long time to find and convict the culprit.

2. (2) A kidnapping took place. A ransom note was left in a hole in a tree in addition to footprints and other clues. The camp was in an uproar in an attempt to track down the kidnappers.

3. (3) It was mysteriously that some escaped convicts got away and were headed toward camp. A group of campers were going down the road when suddenly from the woods they heard some noise -- gun fire, bang! bang! - and the news went back to camp about the escaped convicts. It was a perfect set-up. After several days, the counselor who went in search of the convicts came back to camp with bandages all covered with blood, etc.

4. (4) Practical jokes on the counselors at night wherein everything is turned inside out.

5. (5) Sleep walking in girls camps. Along about two o'clock in the morning get up and get a "posted" older camper to say that Suzie (another "posted" camper) is walking in her sleep. Gradually the whole camp is awakened to see Suzie walking in her sleep and Suzie does some wild things. Pandemonium and fear continues.

6. (6) The Star Spangled Banner is played about two in the morning and everybody finally gets up in a daze and begins to sing.

7. (7) A mock trial is staged. Who killed Rover - the pet dog. Evidence is produced at the trial and the camp chef comes out carrying a knife with blood on it (having just killed a chicken) - everybody is terribly excited.

No doubt many camp directors can add to this horrible list. But I hope the day for this sort of program spicing is rapidly passing. It might not be amiss to add to this list of ill-advised events the upside down days and other less objectionable exciting changes of routine.

But, more to the point, if the program does go stale, perhaps it was somewhat stale at its inception. At the beginning should we not ask ourselves what is CAMPING? What are our goals? What specifically are we to do that will accomplish these goals? What are we to do with the campers and why? Just how much careful planning do we give to our program? In terms of staleness, it might be the leadership. What causes the staff to go stale?

In camps we put into operation an educational movement, a potential dynamo of power for character building saturated with all sorts of splendid educational possibilities - turn it loose and expect it to run on its own. ~~Some~~ I grant that any program needs careful watching, no matter how soundly it has been planned. No one had planned an expedition more carefully than Admiral Byrd, yet when he went to the South Pole it had to be watched at each step to get it in balance and to keep all departments working harmoniously for success. To that extent I say that any program needs to be watched to see whether it is producing at the various stages the results desired.

The usual type of program is what we may call the activity program and it seems to me the common thing is to drag out everything from the city and dump it down in the woods some place and call it a camp. We put in all the athletic equipment and all the other gadgets from A to Z and dump it out just like a school. We have it run like a school and have a director of this and a manager of that who then put on a four ring circus to see how many participants they can get in their activity and the reports are made on the development on the basis of the activity program. Some of the things they do are very beautiful, very artful, they look well. They look well in the catalogue.

There are varying degrees of programs - from zero to a high degree. In general, too often it is a hodge-podge of unrelated activities not directed at sufficiently few focal points to have an educational effect on the child. It is a piece-meal proposition. The child is pulled here and there, to have him feel that he is participating in something infinitely worth while. I say, do as you please and go as you want when you want it. I like the idea of hail stones. They are very refreshing. If you give the child the opportunity to do the things he wants to do, if the opportunities are made easy for him to do them, then he will begin to drive on something and will not have to be kept at it very much, provided he got an interest that was related to his life.

I think there is a great deal of artificiality in the programs. Did you see the circus when it was in town? Well! I did, and I was particularly interested in an Indian who was performing. He stood in the center of the arena and raised a bow and arrow to his shoulder and aimed at the target once, and missed. He aimed a second time, and missed, and also a third time. The fourth time he aimed he hit the bull's eye in the target and everybody applauded and said that it was a marvelous feat...a marvelous example of skill. I went to see the show a second time and found that the Indian repeated this identically. I got an opportunity to talk to the Indian and I asked him why he missed the target the first three times. He said, "Me no miss target - me fool people."

I then said that possibly if he had a better bow and arrow he would find it easier. He replied, "When I want better bow and arrow, I make one." If he needs a better one - he will make one. That is food for thought. The woods are full of opportunities for creating all sorts of activities and play to suit a child's own tastes and own inclinations.

What is camping? I do not know for sure. As many people as there are here, there would be that many different interpretations. All I am saying is that we need to think about it in terms of year-in thinking. It seems to me that camping in a larger sense is a way of living - it is a whole philosophy of life. It is not a city philosophy of living. It is realized from an entirely different way of life and living. Think it over.

There are three words which to me should symbolize camping, and I am glad to have heard them said before me tonight...Adventure - discovery - and exploration. We need more adventure in our camp activities. We need to take more risks in our camping activities, but to take them safely. By all means read Admiral Byrd's books "Little America" and "Discovery." They are the best books for camp directors that I know of in this line.

You say that the only unknown areas left are in the South Pole. That is not true. There are many areas in the country. Any place that you have not explored is still unexplored to the child. A great deal rests in the spirit in which you look at it. Make it a program of discovery. Make it a program of adventure and exploration. A boy I know of ran away from home. When he was brought back his mother asked him why he did it. His answer was that he was tired of the City, that he wanted to be alone for a while and that he wanted to be with the trees for a while.

My suggestion involves a different set-up for the camps. I am venturesome enough to propose it because we have tried it out for a number of years. But, it is a step in growth toward that ultimate goal in camping....campactivities. We are organizing on the basis of campactivities - not activities. Activities are

separate things - campactivities are little camps, small groups, six or seven campers and a counselor, living in a little camp all by themselves, isolated, away from the other groups.....coming together frequently often enough for this group feeling every morning at assembly, etc. Each group, living in a different atmosphere with a different background, with history and tradition back of it. Each exploring, adventuring and carrying on its camp program.

What is the program for the day? The whole day is as free as the wind. What do they do? They are very busy exploring, adventuring and doing a lot of things. All living a different life. There is no program. They go out with the wagon loaded with food and come back with the wagon loaded with rocks and specimens when the food runs out.

To develop this kind of procedure obviously you can see that it would be cheaper and easier to sleep 50 children right along one pavillion. One person could supervise a dining room of 50 children and the rest of the counselors could be some place else. Why all this business of dividing them up? There is duplication of effort. Yes! But you cannot learn except from experience. In life it is the little things that count.

In smaller camps and little groups where there are more things to do, the interdependence multiplies tenfold. If you would drop into the dining room with 50 campers and counselors sitting at the table, one person coming in would hardly be noticed, but you walk down into the tree house or over into the Indian hut or any of those little camps and walk in at eating time and you are an honored guest, because the situation cannot mean anything but that. You have to crowd in.

Is there a place for another department in camp? Why have another department when we are sitting right down in the very lap of nature? What is the procedure for bringing this about? Here is a book report for the Boys Camps in 1936. For a period of 12 years of this procedure there is a story of growth and development.

First, define your goal. This is a matter of staff conference. At least

a week should be spent in camp, before camp opens; settling what your goal is and how to carry out that goal. You must keep doing that each year and for each phase of your total camp program. And now we are thinking of it in each one of these little camps.

Second, to set up specific objectives. Be sure you are headed in the right direction and by a process of conversation and direction, you should feel that your whole staff is in accord.

Third, the operation and supervision of the program. Following them carefully.

Fourth, evaluation of results. If you cannot evaluate your results in terms of changed behavior in Johnny, Mary or Suzie, then what is it all about? Had we not just as well close up? It is the individual camper we are concerned about. We have chosen this program of camping to get the results both in terms of the camper and of camping.

Fifth, the setting up of new goals. In the light of the past experience of each phase of the activity, you set new goals. If this procedure is followed consistently, carefully, critically evaluating both yourselves and the campers and the program as a whole, this will take you back farther into the woods. There is no mistake about it. It will discover the artificial, the usual, the traditional and you will more and more be leaving the old things in the city and will be adapting yourselves to the environment of the woods and nature, which after all is very much closer to the ideas of camping.

Let me give you a few examples of how this works. The reindeer group was getting their wagon and equipment ready for their trip. They go out all week and come together for supplies. The counselor, who happened to be a school teacher from Texas, had on his chaps. They asked what he was going to do with his chaps. He said, "I am going to wear my chaps." They asked if he would need them..... and he said that as he plans to go hiking through the woods, they will protect his legs. The little boy asked then if he needed chaps. The teacher said,

"I don't know what you need, but I know what is necessary for me." "What else can chaps be used for," asked the boy. "I unbuckle them if it is raining and use them as a poncho."

By that time, everybody wanted to make his chaps and now it is traditional that each boy in the reindeer groups makes his own chaps and a thousand and one little gadgets.

The reindeers also cook their own food. A little Italian boy who was cook for the day, was to make spaghetti and was given a recipe for it. This boy read over all the recipes for spaghetti and made a dish which was a combination of them all. When he returned to camp he said to the camp cook, "See here, cook, I have a new recipe for spaghetti, and I would like to give you a copy."

In our play forms, in all these various ways of living and camping, we are finding that play forms arise out of those by-ways of living. The reindeers are not a great deal interested in baseball, volley ball, etc. They have their own ways of playing with lassoes and chaps and numerous other things they create. The play forms seem to rise out of the situation. You cannot find these games in any books.

There, is a place of general recreational freedom, general release and change of tempo. It is possible to have night activities. Some of the most interesting things to discover in nature happen at night.

I should end by saying that this is a program of thinking, planning, executing, evaluating results, in keeping forever our minds on the goal of camping. What is it? What do you mean by camping? What can be meant by camping? Have all the things been discovered in this world? Little Johnny or little Mary have not discovered everything yet. Everything is open for discovery. Areas to be explored, etc. We organize the staffs in a scientific expedition. We go out to explore 25 or 50 acres of land. We think ourselves into a new way of acting and act ourselves into a new way of thinking.