

CAMPING AND DEMOCRACY

L. B. Sharp  
Executive Director of Life Camps  
Lecturer in School of Education, New York University

(Article appearing in 1939 Year Book, National Park Service,  
United States Department of Interior, Washington, D. C.)

If the camping movement has much to offer education and democracy, it will have to undergo considerable rethinking and change. There is much confusion concerning aims, objectives and procedure. In the main, camps have patterned their organization after military systems and methods found necessary in handling large numbers of people in cities. Layout of camps and types of structures should be so planned that they will assist in securing the greatest educational values. There are, of course, exceptions, but a far greater contribution to education of youth, and to the extension of our national ideals, can be attained.

We know in this country that young people like the idea of camping, of going places, of doing vigorous, daring and adventurous things. Our youth are receptive to the camping motive. It would seem that there must be some way to utilize the high educational potentialities of camping as a means of extending our ideals of democracy. The challenge is up to us. We must be concerned, therefore, with the problem of how we may extend the camping movement so that it will make the substantial contribution of which it is capable.

A careful study of the organization and administrative procedures of most camps will show that there are departments, heads of departments, and instructors for each as in school. In school these departments conduct "classes" but in camps they are called "activities". Basically, however, they are the same. Literally, bag and baggage, balls and bats, songs and recreation techniques, and almost everything else from the city

are picked up and taken to the woods where they are stirred around a bit, a few names changed, a day's schedule added, and it is called a camp. Why this scheduled procedure is followed no one seems to know. We find the traditional straight lines of tents or cabins; the proverbial reveille in the morning; setting-up exercises for no good reason; the morning dip (optional or otherwise); and scheduled activities throughout the day, moving people about by whistle, bugle or bell. There are, of course, some desirable variations from this pattern.

An example will serve to illustrate the wrong placement of objectives. A visitor was shown a camp located in a beautiful mountain section of our country. The director pointed out the various barn red buildings. First exhibit was the "mess hall" and the parent-demanded cabins all in straight rows. The prize exhibit was, however, the gymnasium. A gymnasium in the mountains--what a story. Discussion revealed that quite a complete program of physical education including basket ball was carried out in the gymnasium. The whole mountainside was at the camp's front door--enough challenge for any group of big muscles.

Camps are about the only places left where youth can live, explore and do things on their own without the arm of the law or the compulsion and restriction of the home, teacher, or somebody else forever pulling them into line. Let us then so construct and conduct our camps that the greatest amount of wholesome and democratic living will accrue to each individual.

#### Life Camps

A brief explanation of the Life Camps decentralized procedure is presented as a constructive suggestion in camp organization. This procedure is a result of careful experimentation covering a period of twelve



years. In place of the usual "activity" program there has been instituted the "campativity" procedure. Careful evaluation of the plan, step by step, and restatement of goals in the light of results attained has given new meaning and interpretation to CAMPING and has taken it farther away from city, school and military types of programs and methods.

There are three Life Camps: Camp Raritan for boys, ages 8-16, at Pottersville, N. J.; Camp Pole Bridge near Matamoras, Pa., for boys, ages 13-16; and a camp for girls, ages 8-16, at Lake Mashipacong, Sussex, N. J. Our campers are divided into small independent camps, six or eight campers and two trained adult counselors to each group or small camp. At Camp Raritan there are eleven of these small camps, Pole Bridge six, and the girls camp ten. Each camp is located in some attractive, interesting spot and out of sight of the others. They are scattered far and wide over the camp ground--none of them live in the central area or administrating center of the camp. There is no set plan of permanent structures in which the campers live. Their shelters are of various types and all may be moved, changed, altered, or rebuilt according to the plans of each group. In many instances they build their own shelter, living temporarily in a tent while they do construction work. A few types of shelter are tree houses, tepees, covered sleds, long houses made out of small saplings placed in the ground and firmly braced, long houses built on small logs so that the structures can be easily moved around, individual shelters for each camper, lean-tos, round-tos, and, of course, our traditional covered wagon. This last group has a team of horses and a riding horse, and all provisions are carried in the wagon. They travel about the country from five to sixty-five miles away from camp, or between the three camps, using mostly back roads. Their home is on wheels and they are at home wherever they are. All of these small camp groups plan their own meals, plan their own pro-

grams, and in general run their own show. Naturally, there are times when some of the groups do things together, or they all come together on certain occasions.

In this approach the real aim of camping is to teach the youngsters to love the woods. Naturally, they cannot learn to love the woods unless they live in the woods, so there is where they spend the most of their time. The aim of camping, from the standpoint of individual development, is to secure the greatest amount of the most wholesome total personality growth in a favorable camping environment. Obviously, this includes social adjustments, character growth, and those cultural attributes upon which most would agree. Further, this program is based upon five fundamentals of life--shelter, food, self-occupation, spiritual uplift, and group relationships:

Shelter - From the beginning of man the need for shelter has played an important part in living. The concept of shelter is deeply rooted in human nature. Youngsters have a natural and keen interest in wanting to put and keep a roof over their heads, a place for themselves, a place to put things - a place to live. Present day living conditions in large cities do not give the child a chance for this natural educational outlet. Hence it is fundamental in a camp program. It would be, therefore, unsound educationally to provide ready-made structures for the campers.

Food - Food is, of course, basic to life. Full advantage is taken of this fine educational opportunity of teaching campers how to select, care for, and cook their own food. Under careful guidance of a dietitian, children have the chief responsibility of planning their own meals, cooking their own food, and all the problems and difficulties related to food. They enjoy it and can do it adequately. Most of these small camps will cook



at least two meals a day. They can, of course, arrange to eat meals in the dining hall whenever they wish. In this case, they notify the dietitian when they will come in for a meal; the dietitian does not tell them what to do. In each camp they design and build their own ovens and cooking places. Muffins, cookies, pies, cakes, roast meats, and other delicacies are produced in generous quantities in these outdoor facilities. Many samples of jellies and jams are taken home. Imagine the surprise on mother's face at the sight of Fred's jam made in the woods. One boy reports that he taught his mother how to make a blueberry pie. A purposeful and vital problem for discussion around the campfire in the small camps is what the menus shall be for the next three or four days and how to cook the selected items. Cook books and menu guides are much in use. Here the dietitian actually becomes a consultant and guide.

Self-Occupation - Each of the small camps is responsible for working out its own program. How to occupy one's time is an important problem to solve. If a camper is placed in a favorable camp environment, and if the counselors themselves love to live in the woods and are skilled in their art, it is not difficult for a group to figure out how they would like to spend their time. These youngsters spend a great deal of time exploring, traveling about, experimenting, building things they need, digging, hunting for interesting things, camping overnight or for two or three days, visiting farms, and in general looking after their own welfare, comfort and happiness.

Spiritual Uplift - Regardless of a person's religious teachings or convictions, what church he goes to, or if he does not go at all, back of and underneath this thing we call life there must be some relationship of man to nature. It is a mysterious and illusive thing, yet it is something

that can be felt. After a certain amount of the right kind of experience in this way of camping and living, this deeper meaning and significance of nature seems to penetrate the camper's mind. It has a definite influence upon his thinking and upon his spiritual life.

Group Relationships - These are evidenced in the intensive inter-relationships of individual campers in each small camp group, among the various small camps, and when all groups come together. A small camp group made up of six to eight campers and two counselors is much like a family group. Things that help and things that hurt come to the surface more sharply and quickly. Personality clashes and agreements come more intensively and firmly. There are many occasions for adjustments and companionships. They are all intensified and make for a better social adjustment and co-operation.

There is much visiting back and forth among the campers and counselors. There is an increasing amount of this neighborliness. The counselors share their personalities and skills with campers and other groups. There seems to be about the right number of occasions for all groups to come together where they get this larger group feeling and camp spirit. These small groups spend a considerable amount of their time visiting neighbors in the community, visiting farms, and, in general, take an interest in the countryside adjacent to camp.

Campivities - There are no departments of crafts, music, dramatics, dancing, athletics, and all of the usual list. Our program is built upon the campivity procedure in contrast to the common "activity" plan. A campivity implies the knowledge and use of many skills, and further, it implies the using of these skills to accomplish some larger end. A skill is not thought of as an end in itself, but merely as a means to an end. The



motive for learning a skill arises chiefly from the need. In a situation where everything depends so much upon the individual for his own comfort, welfare and happiness, he is quick to recognize needs and therefore no other motive for skills seems necessary. It is a natural educational process.

#### Early American Life

A study of the struggles 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. A careful study of their progress will show that shelter, food, self-occupation, spiritual influence, group living and community effort were basic elements in the development of our country. At the time of the signing of our American Constitution over ninety percent of the people lived in a strictly rural area. Today nearly fifty-five percent of our 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 reference 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.

#### Public School Camps

In Life Camps this year there was started a significant experiment in cooperation with the New York City Public Schools through the Mrs. Johanna M. Lindlof Camp Fund. The chief purpose of this program is to determine wherein and to what extent the experiences in camp are educa-

tionally sound, worthwhile, and can rightfully be included as an integral part of the public school program. One hundred and ten children were selected from seven different schools and they stayed at camp for a month each. The program and procedure has been carefully set up and outcome will be observed for several years before any very conclusive results can be determined.

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

This pioneering venture is a new kind of education, making it possible for boys and girls to have, as a part of the regular school curriculum, opportunities to solve on their own hook the questions posed by life outdoors.



### How To Decentralize

The movement to decentralize and reorganize camps is beginning to take hold. Many organizations and camp directors find themselves with buildings and equipment unsuited to the philosophy of the decentralization and campativity procedure. It often, therefore, results in an attitude of opposition to safeguard what they have already built. It is not necessary or advisable to change the whole procedure at once. The following steps are suggested:

1. Make a careful study and restatement of aims, objectives, and the meaning of camping.
2. Examine carefully the program of the camp and wherever possible remove the so-called "activities" that are not related to camping.
3. Increase the amount of exploratory, adventurous discovery and constructive types of experiences and give less emphasis to others.
4. Secure a staff that is interested in this type of program and give it sufficient training.
5. Conduct a six or eight-day conference in camp before the opening of the season with all staff members present. The staff should participate in the discussion of aims and objectives and procedures of the program.
6. The first year start with at least two groups. Let them find their locations in interesting places isolated from the camp. They should be well-equipped, well-staffed, and given much instruction and freedom. The amount of cooking they do should be in proportion to the skill acquired--one meal a day is sufficient as a beginning. They need not conform to all of the usual rules, regulations and schedules of the main camp.
7. Add groups during the season if advisable and as rapidly as they can

be absorbed into the new plan.

8. Campers should have a part in designing and building their shelters.

Some cabins or present structures needing repair can be carefully torn down and used for construction purposes. Many different kinds of shelter should be used.

The original cost of construction and the cost of maintenance and upkeep of the decentralized camp is less than in a centralized plan. An excellent example of this is at Dallas, Texas. The Big Brothers organization of Dallas adopted the decentralized campativity procedure plan in setting up its new camp. They have only the essential administrative buildings in the central area. The campers live out in small camps in structures designed and built by the boys and counselors. The results of their first year's operation were most satisfactory.

No one should despair at the size of the task of changing organization and procedure. If it is right and educationally sound to shift to the philosophy of the decentralized campativity procedure, nothing should stand in the way. Once the start is made the change will come very rapidly within the camp, and the results will be gratifying. There is no standard pattern to follow in the decentralized plan. There must not be a pattern. Each location is different. The campativity procedure is geared definitely into our concept and ideals of democracy.

#### Design and Construction

Breaking up the camps into smaller groups in this way effects the design and layout of camp buildings. The centralized set-up with large cabins in a row or in small clusters does not fit the need. Buildings do not need to be so large or expensive or so numerous. The structures for living accommodations of campers, taking geographic areas into account,



should be simple, moveable, alterable and economical. Campers should have some part in designing and building them or keeping them in repair. These structures and facilities should not be permanent. A permanent shelter somewhat defeats the underlying values of the captivity procedure. This plan should be popular with park departments and organizations which plan to build new camps because the construction and maintenance costs are much less. Close cooperation between the architects and designers and camp directors will be necessary to build the kind of camps that will produce the greatest amount of educational results. The National Park Service has already recognized the need for this move to decentralize the camps. In some of their plans they have reduced the size of cabins and spread them over a wider area.

#### Leadership Training

Many people contend that it is not possible to permit campers to utilize the woods in the way that this decentralized plan suggests. Experience, however, shows that to the extent that campers have responsibility for the use and care of the woods and are taught reforestation and conservation, they will be protectors of our forests and use them in the right way. It is largely a matter of education.

Life Camps proposes to establish a National Camp of advanced leadership training for directors and executives beginning July 1940. Courses for counselors will be added later. The new National Camp will be located on the 1000-acre property in Sussex County, New Jersey. This new camp course covering a six-weeks period will include practice and theory in the various aspects of camp leadership, nature, construction, maintenance, food, heavy craft work, organization and administration, waterfront projects, and various cultural aspects of camping. Special emphasis will be

given to public school camps. Camping and educational experts will be included on the faculty. Six points of graduate credit will be given to those who register through New York University.

The camping movement in the United States is a potential power for education. Our national, state and county governments are rightfully and rapidly setting aside more land for public use. Large sums of money are being spent to provide increased facilities for camping and public recreation. A challenging opportunity is placed before the leaders in camping and education to use these facilities to further our own national ideals.

November 3, 1939.