

Camp Woodstock Stories

By
Paul Crilly
Revised

Lewis Knox and his friend Lewis Fox

Long time Camp Director; Lewis Knox would invite his friend Lew Fox to speak to the campers at each chapel gathering. For many years Lewis Fox was on the Board of Education for the Hartford Schools and had a keen interest in the success and character growth of young people. He always struck me as a kind man. I remember one story he would tell us. It seems a young boy was always misbehaving, so one day his father told him that every time he did a bad thing, his father would put a nail in the door. Soon, the door was covered with nails. The nails showed the ugliness of doing bad things. One day the boy asked his father, "Is my behavior that bad?" "Yes, I am afraid so," his dad said, "but every time you do a good thing, I will remove a nail." Soon, the door was free of nails.

Lew Knox and his breakfast messages

In July 1997, at the 75th anniversary of Camp Woodstock, I asked Rev. Lewis Knox's daughter why he decided to get involved with the YMCA and rather than being a regular minister like most seminary graduates. She told me that he could reach more people through the Y than the church. Every morning before breakfast, Lewis Knox would give a short sermon to encourage the campers to live better lives and to take full advantage of what Woodstock offered. One story that I particularly recall was the Biblical story of the 12 spies who went into the Promised Land. The 12 spies returned and told the people how wonderful it was, flowing with milk and honey. However, ten of them were afraid to enter it. But two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb said "Yes we can enter the land and enjoy all it has to offer." The application of course was that in the next two weeks, Woodstock had awesome opportunities to learn new skills, make lifelong friends and have wonderful experiences. That the campers should be not fear to take full advantage of everything Woodstock had to offer. It was the proverbial "Seize the day" talk.

Lew Knox and the Thursday night banquet

In the 1960s, the camping term was two weeks. On the last Thursday of the term, there was always a fancy banquet in the dining hall. After dinner, Lewis Knox tell us to "get comfortable because there would be a time of long speeches. The Program Director, and other staff would say their pieces. The campers would then call out each of the kitchen staff, in a shout of something like "We want Tom, we want Tom..." and give each one a rousing applause. The applause included stamping their feet on the floor like a herd of elephants. Toward the conclusion of the program, Lewis Knox would always proclaim that "never in history would this same group ever meet again." After dinner we would all go down to the Lodge for the Awards program.

Fred Wirth and Melvin Moose

In the summer of 1966, Camp Woodstock added 5 new cabins and created a new unit for 11 year old campers. The unit name was called the Cherokees. Fred Wirth was its first unit director. Every unit had its own “fight” song, but the Cherokees didn’t yet have one. One evening the Cherokees were gathering and Fred was telling the campers a story about these two kids who came up with a song that parodied the 1960s Mickey Mouse club song, but instead of Mickey Mouse, it was Melvin Moose. It goes something like this, “Who’s the leader of the herd that’s made for you and me - M-e-l-v-i-n-M-o-o-o-s-e, Melvin Moose! Melvin Moose!forever let us hold our antlers high high....Come along and join the herd and eat some grass with me.....” That became the Cherokees’ song.

Native Americans explain why some trees shed their leaves

When I was an 8 year old camper, our unit got a visit from a so called “Native American” We all knew it wasn’t really a native American, but most of us went along with the gag to keep our counselors happy. At that time, the role player was a counselor named Dason. When not wearing native dress, Dason looked like the character “Mr Clean. In any case, this Native American actor told the story of why some trees shed their leaves and others don’t. It seems that the many moons ago, an awesome Chief told the trees that he was going on a long journey and would return someday with tremendous rewards. He encouraged them to be patient because he would be gone a long time but he would indeed return. This chief was gone many years and some of the trees doubted his promised return. However he did return and put a curse on those trees who doubted his sincerity. And that’s why some trees shed their leaves every fall.

Cabin Cleanup

Good housekeeping was a priority at Camp Woodstock. Every morning after breakfast the campers would return to their cabins to make their bed, sweep the floors, and otherwise clean and tidy up the cabin. Cleanliness was such a priority that the cabins in a unit competed with each other to get the cleanest cabin award which was announced during lunch time. The highest score was 10. The campers worked very hard so they could earn the coveted “Honor Cabin Award” given out after the camp banquet. It was tough competition. For example, even a grain of sand in the mattress below the sleeping bag could cost you a point.

Southbridge and the Counselor’s day off

Sometime in the middle of the camping period, every counselor would get a 12 hour pass to leave the camp. Leave would start at noon, and you had to be back by midnight. I was not fortunate enough to have a car and so my best option was to bicycle to Southbridge Mass. My counselor colleague Phyllis McQue, would loan me her bicycle and I would bicycle 10 miles into Southbridge. At Southbridge I would eat my lunch, and dinner and have a sundae at Friendly’s and spend the rest of my time at the Southbridge Library. There was an attractive librarian, but somehow I could never get the nerve to ask her out. I would then leave Southbridge at 10:30 PM and bicycle along the long dark country road back to Woodstock. While bicycling back to camp,

there was this nasty dog on someone's porch waiting for me to come by so he could bite me. If I got up enough speed, I was able to avoid the dog.

The candy store and rest period

After lunch and before the 2:30 afternoon activities, the campers had the opportunity to buy candy at the camp store. This was always a tedious affair since the lines were long and you could only buy small amounts of candy. Often we traded candy with our fellow campers. After the store, the campers had to go to their cabins for a 1 hour "rest period" The first half hour, we were supposed to be on flat on our backs sleeping, but the second half hour, we could write post cards, or read our comic books. The campers were always told the rest hour was for them, but in reality it was for the poor tired camp counselor.

Charlie of the MTA and George McGovern

In the 1972 season, many of the counselors were students at Earlham College, a hotbed of radicalism. The Earlham students were ardent supporters of George McGovern for President. We would sing a song about this fellow "Charlie of the MTA" who could never get off the train. Somewhere in the lyrics there was a phrase - "and vote for George McGovern." However the Steward Twins, Lisa and Laura and I were ardent Nixon supporters and though a small minority, we would get our licks in by shouting "Richard Nixon," whenever McGovern was yelled out.

Paul Crilly was a Woodstock camper in the summers of 1964-1969, a CIT in the summers of 1970 and 1971 and was a Counselor in the summer of 1972.