

A Few Personal Reflections on the Sokol Summer Home

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I have written this essay for my family (some of whom may actually read it), for friends who may care to revive a few memories and for me. It's quirky, opinionated, and too long, but it is easier to write than to shorten. My apologies for that, and also for any errors. For obvious reasons naming people and what I remember of them is tricky and, thus, with a few exceptions I have avoided doing so (last names removed). There are so many people who I remember staying at the camp at one time or another – too many to mention, but who were good fun, good companions, good advisors, good people. I have settled for listing the names of the hard core (weekend) campers and a small group of regulars closer to my own age. Of the former (in alphabetical order): Helen and Roy H., Janet and Tony K., Joe and Marie K., Audrey and Bob K, Charley and Fran M., Frank and Marylee M., Ethel and Joe R, Chas and Gloria S., George and Paul Z.. Of my own age group: Bob, Jim and Jerry, and Lou, who lived across the street; of the ladies: June F., Georgene B, Tina B (a regular visitor); and also Patty and Sandy Z. and Sandy S. who were on the staff

during my year as counselor. The indispensable cooks: Babi K. and Babi S. Lots of great memories and thanks to all. Many deceased as of May 2013.

Some early experiences

I have always felt that summer camps can be special places. I remember numerous happy times over many years, and from what I have heard and read many others feel the same. My own experience started around age 5 when my mother, Joan (Jana), volunteered to assist in the kitchen of the Sokol Summer Home

My parents were members of Sokol Havlicek Tyrs (Lawndale and 26th street in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago) where I attended (rather unwillingly) twice weekly gymnastic classes. Sokol was part of our lives: my mother attending meetings, used the library and helped in the kitchen during the annual gym exhibition and other functions. During the summer, the activities of the Sokol moved to the camp in Crystal Lake. A number of the ladies regularly volunteered for kitchen and other work on weekends and during their vacations. I have pictures from the early 1950s showing Ms ***, ***, ***, ***, ***, Smolik, and *** (whose last name eludes me) taking breaks. They seemed to enjoy working together and were lifelong friends. They also had ample time for walks, swimming or reading or just sitting and talking below the trees surrounding the mess hall.

At first I stayed with mom in one of the rooms attached to the mess hall, or in the cook's cabin. After breakfast I was off with the campers, participating in all their activities, and returning at night to the security of a parent. I was slowly eased into independence in familiar surroundings. Later, I moved to the boy's barracks. There was the occasional pang of homesickness – an old postcard has “come and get me”-- scratched on it (they didn't). One survives. On Friday evenings I would keep an eye out for her arrival, and it was wonderful to see her walking across the field. A short hug and I was back with the kids, secure that I had not been abandoned (though at times she might have been justified). Others started out in the same way.

Joan would often take her two weeks of vacation there, and otherwise catch a ride out for the weekend. Some mornings we would go out in the camp rowboat– it was one of the few occasions I had to fish, and the results were disappointing. Yet it was a beautiful experience, sunshine, clear water, and tranquility (pre-ubiquitous motor boat days). However, I get a bit sad thinking about the time we caught a small turtle that I later took home. There were lily pads in the shallow part of the lake on which turtles could bask. We quietly paddled up behind one and picked it up from below—it never had a chance. But now I wonder if we ever saw any turtles again – and if there aren't any in the lake any longer, we may have had a hand in it. Who was aware of these things then?

A Camp in Crystal Lake- an inspired decision

Sokol Summer Home was located in Lakewood, to the west of Crystal Lake town, about 50 miles to the NW of Chicago. To my generation its foundation was steeped in the mists of time. Apparently there were two available suitable properties: the wooded peninsula that juts into the lake from the north (what we called “the Point”) and the chosen location, a couple of blocks to the north of the NW shore of the lake. The camp grounds themselves were a rectangle of roughly 200m (N-S) by 80m (about a Chicago residential block) and eventually became embedded in a residential area. They were bordered on the west by Clover Drive, by Thornwood Lane to the north and Mulberry Lane to the south, then all gravel/dirt roads. To the east was a field (now cut by the new Holly Drive) beyond which there was a row of small houses. Trees of various sizes surrounded the predominantly open field.

Approaching from the south the visitor was greeted by the “Sokol Summer Home” sign, in front of the mess hall/kitchen. The main dining area was fitted with two long tables and benches, bordered on two sides by small tables generally used by guests. Beneath the kitchen was a large basement for storage. There had been several expansions, one involving the attachment on the east side of 3 rooms, two of which were for vacationers, and the third was used as an office. A porch had been added to the south and west sides as had a vestibule on the north. The entire mess hall

was surrounded by picnic tables and large trees providing welcome shade from the hot summer sun. At a distance, to the east and beyond the birdhouse, was the so called cook's cabin, with two rooms and a small porch. Also known as the "honeymoon cottage", it would have been less than ideal given the paper-thin walls (partial wall?) between the two units. When weekend revelers wound up, it was quieter than the rooms adjoining the mess hall.

To the north, across the field were the barracks and outdoor recreational facilities. The girls and women occupied the long building at the northwest corner (bordered by Clover and Thornwood Lanes). Across the way, on the northeast side were the men's barracks and next to it (to the south) that of the boys. Between them, close to Thornwood Lane was the cabin occupied by Teach (below) and later by the counselor. Close to it there was a horseshoe pit (bordering Thornwood Lane) nicely shaded by large trees (one of which was famous in camp lore for being hit by a weekender demonstrating how to steer a car using only his knees). In front of the cabin was a flagpole and in my early days a hand pump, the one source of water in that part of the camp. A bonfire pit was close by. A bit south was a wooden structure supporting a volleyball net, rings and a low horizontal bar (for gymnastics), and a tired backboard/basketball hoop. Parallel bars, a side horse and a standard (high) horizontal bar rounded off the gymnastics equipment (the sawdust pit under the high bar also used for high jumping) Finally there was a set of impressively high swings, seesaws and highflyers off to the side. The field was used for ball games etc.

The barracks were Spartan —wooden floors, rafters, bare light bulbs, and thankfully a screen door, though that often didn't help much. Beds/bunks were lined up with wooden lockers (formerly candy machines) in between. Indoor toilets came years later. It was all fairly basic, but all one needed. Perhaps it was good that we were fairly isolated — some 2 miles from the commercial strip on Highway 14 and perhaps 3 1/2 from downtown Crystal Lake— so there was no temptation to hang around in town.

A place to see friends and former neighbors

We kick off the summer

The camp season kicked off on Fourth of July weekend -- a big event with lots of people coming out especially on Sunday. Most folks came out for the day, for a fine meal at noon, to enjoy the beach, play some games (horseshoes and volleyball were popular) or just sit around the mess hall and drink. Campers were signed in for the week. For many of us regulars it was really the start of the summer --the time between the end of school and the opening of camp hardly counted as real vacation.

People looked forward to meeting acquaintances, sometimes ones not seen all year. The camp was a common summer meeting place for members of Sokols throughout the Chicago area (hence, Sokol Summer Home rather than Sokol Havlicek Tyrs Summer Home). Though it attracted mostly folks of Czech background, others came and were welcome. Some of the latter just dropped their kids off for a week or two, also recognizing it as a good summer environment. There were many repeat visitors and campers. Among the regulars most of the relationships probably had been forged in Chicago's Lawndale neighborhood (specifically the part of Lawndale extending from Cermak Road-31st street (north to south), and Pilsen Park to Cicero Ave (east to west)). In earlier times folks would have seen one another a couple of times a week at the Sokol gym during the non-summer months. However, with the movement to the suburbs in the 1950s the weekly gym ties were often broken. In my own age group, gym friends moved to Cicero, Berwyn, North Riverside, Riverside and probably elsewhere and it just was not practical to travel to the "old neighborhood" for an hour gym class. The summer camp in Crystal Lake helped to sustain such relationships for many years. In fact there were quite a number of lifelong friendships, continuing decades after the camp had closed.

Sunday lunch was a hefty affair—a few slabs of meat, several sliced dumplings (or potatoes), zeli (sauerkraut) or some vegetable, lots of gravy, topped off by coffee and kolacky. The sales of meals were one of the main financial underpinnings of the camp. Tickets for lunch were available in the office, and there was always a long line. As a kid I always thought that visitors must have been irritated to come out to the country and then cool their heels waiting in line inside. Why not have several people selling tickets during the peak time I wondered? The answer may have been the sign pinned to the office door warning one and all that the occupant had a difficult personality and should not be

crossed (or something to that effect). The job seems to have been the private preserve of a certain gentleman, not to be screwed with. I wondered how many people didn't bother to come back.

The regulars who came for weekends and their annual vacations started to show up on Friday nights, sometimes driving directly from work. In my earliest recollection, a few (Charlie and Fran M.) would come out on motorcycles (but that became less practical after babies came along). It was only many years later, after I became a weekender myself, that I fully understood how they must have felt – TGIF!!!! The exhilaration of the weekend to come; getting out on the open road (before all the traffic lights and jams), looking forward to relaxing, meeting friends, maybe having a beer or two, beach time, a bonfire, away from the hot city, and so on (though there was also work to be done). My mom must have felt the same though I don't think she ever expressed it. She would hitch a ride with someone after work on Friday helping out with the gas.

The mess hall was the center of social life. Much of the time there was someone in the kitchen and in the evenings people often gathered to play cards or have the inevitable beer. Someone (Joe K., I think) was inspired to buy a jukebox so there was music to be had. It played the big 78s (revolutions per minute) stacked on arms that would move them under a needle. It lit up beautifully. I learned later that some of the older Sokol members grumbled about the “unnecessary” expense, but it was well used – for dances, on Sundays and to entertain the occasional day tour. They still bring back a touch of nostalgia. Several years ago I saw one in a shop window that had been faithfully restored selling for \$26000 (2006 dollars). I remember the low beer (and soda) coolers where the bottles just hung and had to be pulled out by hand. Later they were replaced by automatic dispensing machines--pop in a coin (a quarter for beer, a dime for a Coke) and a bottle slides out – and these too got a lot of use. Interestingly, the camp had some kind of arrangement with the town authorities who waived the need for a liquor license, if I understood correctly. Needless to this saved a lot of money (the camp would have used the license for only the 6 weeks that it was open. Perhaps it worked because there wasn't any trouble. Some of the younger camp staff may have occasionally helped themselves to a bottle or two, but there was no problem of underage drinking. The authorities may have turned a blind eye because the campers acted responsibly-- a beautiful balance between official tolerance and private responsibility that seems rarely achieved now.

Something for all age groups

Unlike the very specialized camps that have become popular, all age groups were welcome and to be seen, especially on weekends. It is said to be socially healthy for different age groups to mix, at least from time to time ---rather than the segregation of the very young, teens, middle agers, and the old that is common (though some certainly prefer it that way). It was not unusual to see teens working side by side with older folks, in the kitchen and elsewhere. Needless to say people generally congregated by age group, folks who had grown up together, or had similar experiences. At around age 6 (roughly from 1950) I met many of the kids who would become long-time friends (I have a picture from this period of Jerry R., Bob K. and me holding sad-looking bows made from branches), and these friendships continued into adult hood. But we also developed friendships with those 3-5 years our senior, especially through sports, and also with the older generation of regulars. We were largely oblivious to much younger kids, which I have been told is normal.

But we did watch a younger generation come up, more or less in a parallel world. I don't know how old I was when, one day, a baby carriage appeared. First, there was one kid, and everyone fussed over her. Then there was another, and yet another. The women's barracks seemed to become a full time nursery on weekends. A few years later, there was a gang running around—they ran free, from one side of the camp to the other, disappearing, and appearing as if out of nowhere. No need for parents to worry here. There was the occasional bawling, someone falling, getting cut or stung, but generally nothing serious. At the beach they wore funny little hats and built sand castles. I thought then that if I ever had kids I would want them spend their summers here, but it was clear, even then, that this generation would probably be the last to enjoy it. I had the pleasure of meeting some of them as adults many years later.

Outings for the ladies

Periodically the camp hosted outings for various groups of ladies. They arrived sometime midweek, disgorged from the bus and attacked the few available toilets (the hurry understandable at a time before buses sported toilets). They all seemed to wear shapeless, flowered dresses and toted big handbags. Eventually they settled down on the picnic benches – how some got into the center places I will never know—to play cards or other games. For the occasion loud- speakers were hooked outside to provide music. The jukebox was stuffed with records of old Czech songs, all seemingly sounding alike – all dreary to our young ears (I’m reminded now of old Swiss (German) music which strikes one the same way, and also doesn’t travel). Now, in my old age and being somewhat more tolerant I’m willing to admit that what sounds perpetually good is probably what was popular when growing up. Anyway, lunch may have been the highlight of the excursion: ample soup, probably pork, sauerkraut, dumplings, and gravy, rounded off by kolacky and coffee. Not a meal for the faint of heart or the salad bar types. Some ladies would venture to the barracks on the other side of the camp, or even further, to enjoy the lake and the boisterous kids. Interestingly, these outings were made up almost exclusively of old ladies—though occasionally the odd, skinny guy was to be seen. What happened to all the Czech men? Perhaps old guys just don’t socialize well and just stay at home? Or it may be the longevity of what used to be called the “weaker sex”, probably my first awareness of it. It is said that women have better social support systems, and are more independent and thus survive. On the other hand, expert opinion has it that most guys would rather die than wash out their socks and fry an egg. Be that as it may, I have gotten to appreciate what an enjoyable event this must have been (at least for the ones who were not habitual complainers). In the days when few of these oldsters had their own cars, it was a nice chance to get out of the city—an enjoyable bus ride with friends, games under the shade trees, a good meal --- some might even have been heard to say “this is very nice”.

There was nothing the volunteers couldn’t do

The camp was acquired in 1940 and building started shortly thereafter (interrupted by the war?). The mess hall/kitchen was the first to go up; by the time my family started to come (late 1940s) all the eventual buildings and most of the playground equipment had been erected. All or most was a volunteer effort. It seems that in the early stages of construction a lot of the folks slept in tents – they occasionally got put up years later and served as a good place to hang out.

A smoothly running Camp Committee

My age group was never much aware of the formal organization of the camp, perhaps because it ran so smoothly (at least in my eyes). In retrospect one is struck by the apparent informality—a light touch. No one was ever seen running around with a name tag trumpeting his/her position (the counselor’s chain and whistle were a symbol but also served a real purpose). Sokol members volunteered for a Camp Committee, which elected a president, VP, treasurer, secretary and perhaps something else. The people in these positions changed annually, seemingly through rotation. The committee dealt with building and renovation, purchase of equipment and supplies, accounts, scheduling of tours, selection of films, the local authorities (city regulations and taxes), and so on. They hired the two paid staff, the head cook (who ruled the kitchen with an iron hand) and the counselor, and arranged for a few “junior girls” to help in the kitchen. Preparations for camp opening and closing had to be organized. I never realized how much organizational work there was to do until I recently started to think about it.

Maintenance and projects galore

Volunteers took care of maintenance and improvements. Prior to camp opening, shutters were removed from the doors and windows, gymnastic apparatus was moved outside from winter storage, playground equipment installed, barracks floors were swept and scrubbed with pine oil (were the mattresses ever beaten to get the dust out?), various repairs done and coats of paint slapped on. After the camp got its own beach, the raft had to be put in the water—a tedious job getting the flotation barrels from storage and attaching them with bands. Camp closure required a similar effort. Grass was cut at the beach and the camp several times during the season. Mower reliability was a big problem in the early days – who knows how many machines were tried—a clunky vertical axel thing, a huge black riding mower that did a good job and was fun to drive (if it could be started), and so on. The most lasting solution was a

couple of ordinary lawn mowers from Sears, but it was slow going— in one instance it took Joe R. the better part of weekend to cut the field (roughly solid city block).

A number of large projects were carried out by the older generation, many of whom had special technical skills, some of them learned in the military. They seemed to be able do everything — mechanical stuff, electricity, plumbing, carpentry, and so on. One year they installed a large evacuation fan under the roof of the mess hall. Another year they constructed the raft (said it was the best on the lake) which required, welding the frame, building a wooden deck and attaching the floatation drums. Perhaps the largest project was the installation of toilets in the barracks. The old (hand) water pump was replaced by an electric one and a holding tank was installed in the rafters of the central cabin. A few poor souls were enlisted to dig trenches for the water and sewer pipes — I have picture of some young guy with a shovel sweating in a ditch. Pipes were threaded and joined, a toilets partitioned off and equipment installed. I have a powerful memory of Joe Koudelik, Charley Malina and Joe Rus (though others were involved) planning and discussing technical issues as work progressed. Amicably. It was a model of cooperation that left a lasting impression — people using their collective skills, getting things done.

During my later years Babi Kindal, the head cook, and Babi Schultz were in the kitchen making sure that all of us got well fed (in my own case too well during the summer I was counselor). But who could resist. I have already mentioned some of the ladies who volunteered in the kitchen, generally on weekends, and some during their vacations as well. In later years a few “junior girls” were recruited to help in the kitchen (in exchange for room and board).

It recently struck me what a disciplined and continuous effort it was to operate a camp on a largely volunteer basis. A dedicated group of people must be present every weekend (and some devote their vacations) to make it function. It simply wouldn't do for members of a core group bearing responsibility to show up only once or twice a season.

Teach

V.S., better known as “Teach” was an institution at the camp during my early years, serving in many capacities (and more broadly in the Sokol system)—as senior man, occasional instructor, handyman, etc. Whether he was formally camp director I don't know, but everyone seemed to defer him, perhaps also because all were used to jumping to his orders at the gym. During most of the year he taught gymnastics and calisthenics to seemingly all age groups (male and female?) at the Sokol gym. Apparently he had been a tailor in his day job, but that may have been before he took on that time-consuming gym instructor role. In his younger days he did athletics and, of course, gymnastics. Word was that that he had done a stint as a circus performer and, somewhat improbably that he did a one arm handstand at an advanced age. A wide and ragged vertical scar the length of his stomach was a constant source of fascination and conversation, at least among the kids. One rumor was that his appreciation of beer had required the replacement of his stomach (a still impossible medical feat in 2013); and one obnoxious camper was willing to bet (“any amount of money”— an overused expression at the time) that this was true. A less colorful, though more likely, explanation was that a bamboo pole broke while he was vaulting and lacerated his stomach. Anyway I don't think that anyone of my age group ever dared to ask him (?).

Teach would sit at the head of the table during meals. In addition to being near the kitchen, if in need of a second helping, it allowed him to keep an eye on everyone and restore order before things started to get out of hand. Thinking it safer, the older kids would congregate at the far end of the table leaving the young ones to sit close to him. He used this position to keep abreast of happenings at the camp beyond his gaze. Without much effort, he would learn about all the transgressions in the barracks, who had been smoking or swearing, who had snuck out after dark to meet the girls/guys, who was planning to do what, what prohibited stuff was to be found in lockers, and so on. The little snitches always seemed ready to rat out anyone for a bit of attention. Did I (or Frank?) adopt this effective intelligence gathering system at a later date? I honestly don't remember.

He spent most of his day keeping an eye on things and working around the camp—re-roofing the barracks, removing garbage from the kitchen, painting, etc. He built the camp's earliest rowboat, a very heavy wooden job in which he

occasionally gave rides at night.¹ One year he dug a garbage pit behind the “honeymoon” cottage. He marked out a square and dug —tough work in the sun. After a few days he disappeared completely and only the occasional shovelful of dirt could be seen flying out of the hole. There was always work to do, including gopher patrol. The little varmints loved the large mowed athletic area and regularly moved in from the surrounding fields. They could easily dig their holes and then sit on their hind legs to view the whole camp for signs of impending danger. But their burrows, as comfortable as they might be, were a prescription for sprained ankles. On his way to breakfast, he would eyeball any newcomers that had made themselves at home during the night. Later he would come by with a couple of large glass milk bottles and a container of water. He would stick a bottle into one end of the creature’s tunnel, pour water in the second hole and quickly ram the other bottle in it. Of course gopher shot out, into a bottle, after which he drowned it on the spot, or if it managed to escape, he whacked it with a calisthenics stick. One can only wonder if all this inspired the whack-a-mole gopher scenes in Caddy Shack many years later. Today it might offend some animal rights campaigners, but after all, what else was to be done?

It was probably also Teach who showed us how to deal with a wasp nest: a stick, a rag wrapped around one end, a dash of kerosene, light and hold below nest—see their little wings burn. Very useful in later life. Thank you for that as well, Teach.

In retrospect, there was a fascinating daily ritual to behold. As surely as the sun set Teach could be seen crossing the field pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with bottles of beer -- 6? (or more?) of them -- who knows? —it would have been indiscrete to peer too closely. He certainly earned a drink after a long day’s work, often in the sun, and what better way to replenish the precious body fluids? He was a widower without any obvious girlfriends at the camp and there was no TV in his cabin, – so perhaps he spent the evenings reminiscing with a cold one (or perhaps not so cold). From personal experience, memories resurrect more easily with the help of a glass or two—try it. Anyway, in the morning he would emerge and do the return trip, empties in the wheelbarrow, looking perfectly fit. In a sign of the times this was done in the open – no surreptitious brown paper bags or unlabeled cartons—all perfectly natural. The daily treks may have raised the eyebrows of new visitors to the camp, but I don’t think anyone ever mentioned it. Perhaps such tolerance reflected the relaxed Czech beer drinking culture-- enjoy but don’t make a nuisance of yourself. Teach was a pillar of the camp contributing to it greatly. He was fortunate to be able to spend his last active summers there --- working, enjoying good food and drink, good company and the outdoors. One could do much worse.

Counselors on 24/7

The main responsibility for the campers fell on the camp counselor, and after Teach was no longer there, he was the person in charge. It was a 24/7 job, starting with the welcome of families, registering kids, assuring parents and, of course, leading the daily activities (below). He was also the first line of medical care -- bee stings, mosquito bites, and cuts were taken care of. Creams were applied to sunburned kids who had arrived lilywhite earlier in the day. Sprains were bandaged -- bruises one could do nothing about. Splinters from the wooden floors were common and kids would hobble off to have them taken out. Some of us got very proficient removing them, a skill that came in handy later. A first aid kit was always taken to the beach. Colds could be difficult to get rid of during the summer and, frustratingly, kept one out of the water (did that make a difference?). From time to time one could see a gloomy kid, all dressed, sitting on the shore. Rarely, someone was taken to the doctor in town --- there was at least one broken arm. If all else failed the parents came out to take their suffering offspring home.

There were a number of counselors throughout the years: Frank M. was the longest serving; there were also a couple of teachers (including the only lady), yours truly. Perhaps the last was Tony K., a life-long camper. Frank must have

¹ He promised to take us fishing but never did. He said the best place was where the old icehouse had been by Grafton Beach across the lake. I had no idea what an icehouse is, or why the remnants should attract fish, and hesitated to ask. In the summer of 1968 my wife and I were in Maine and needed ice. We went to the camp store where a guy led us to the ice house– on stilts in the lake. Inside he fished a chunk of ice out of a bed of sawdust (an insulator) and hosed it off. The blocks had been cut and stored during the winter—it’s a nice bit of almost obsolete technology. It turns out that wooden stilts planted in a lake become infested with worms, which attract fish. At Grafton only the underwater parts of the icehouse stilts remained. Fifty years later, I finally learned what Teach was talking about. One should always ask, especially as a kid.

been in his late teens when he started, while studying physical education at college and continuing to compete in gymnastics. I first met Frank as a little kid still spending nights in the cabin with my mother. When I moved into the boys barracks, he immediately let me know who was in charge: I got knuckled in the upper arm— God that hurt – and evidently I never forgot it. Apparently, it was his welcome to new campers, a warning: “follow instructions and don’t screw with me.” I vowed to get back at him but eventually settled for pushing him from the raft from time to time. For several years Frank awarded badges for swimming. We got lessons and were tested for various degrees of proficiency: a turtle for the basic level (?), then a sunfish, and so on to a shark (no whales though that might be appropriate now). Proudly we (or our moms) sewed the felt badges to our bathing suits

The cadence of camp life

Adjusting to camp life

Sunday was the day of arrival/departure for most kids. Newcomers were signed in by the counselor, camp fees paid (everyone seemed prepared to pay in advance. No credit asked for – would any have been given?), a bed found, parents’ questions were answered. There was orientation, including a lot of dos and don’ts; those who had heard it before were threatened with bodily harm if they didn’t keep quiet.

Regardless of age, for some kids this was the first time away from home. The reality of separation from parents might hit as the family car pulled away, or later when camp activities slowed and lights in the barracks went out. Homesickness struck. In the dark, it was not unusual to hear the whimpers of some newcomers, but was a counselor ever observed bedside tucking a kid in, giving hugs, or wiping away tears? it was, more or less an unspoken, “suck it up” kid. There was no real alternative to accommodating quickly. Parents provided postcards and letters to write and kids would look forward to mail from home (eyes were on the alert for the daily mail truck). Incredible as it seems, they got along without hourly phone checks or messages from home. The coin operated phone in the mess hall wasn’t much used. One was cut off from the folks for a full week—on the way to independence. On rare occasions parents were called and the precious offspring was taken home. After being broken in, many campers came year after year, which led to long friendships and not incidentally also kept the camp viable. Others, perhaps not even homesick, simply disliked the experience and never returned.

I recently listened to a program featuring a psychologist advising parents on preparing kids for their first time at camp. I was just finishing this and was interested to hear what she had to say. Anyway, it seems that homesickness is normal (people pay for such advice?) and that it is important for kids overcome it on their own. Parents are advised not to call or text them during the week and not tell them that they will be picked up if things don’t go swimmingly. Moreover, kids should be encouraged to write letters (imagine!) home if they feel weepy and they should receive one or two as well. The best preparation is to arrange some overnights with friends. So that’s the latest professional thinking on the subject.

Mornings

Mornings, at 7 (or 7:30?) the counselor would wake up the deeply sleeping campers, all hidden in the depths of their sleeping bags, with an irritatingly cheerful “rise and shine”. Groans, lack of movement, then some stirring etc., but eventually we were up. In the early years there were wash up tables with wash pans in front of the barracks--- very civilized. The theory was that the evening before some responsible souls would drag a large milk can to the hand pump and fill it up. By morning the water would have warmed up (somewhat), and be readily available at the washing stands. The reality was generally different: masses of kids milling around the pump, someone pumping [after the necessary priming] and others trying to splash water on their faces. The installation of the electric pump undermined any discipline that had survived and the milk cans disappeared. One of the guys who had installed the new pump observed that folks were now using ten gallons of water to wash out a toothbrush. Strangely enough with a quick and infinite supply of water now at hand, water fights broke out with greater regularity—especially during evening washup.

Once properly scrubbed (or not) and in various states of dress, we gathered in a circle around the flagpole for flag raising. Typically the grass was saturated with dew (no point wearing shoes). It was refreshing, but the air was still cold at that hour and those of us without the sense to dress properly would stand there shivering, embracing ourselves to stay warm. Two kids were selected to raise the flag while the others stood at attention trying to keep their mouths shut. The flag was clipped the on pulley system, care being taken to keep it from touching the ground, and then it hauled up. The pledge of allegiance followed, with others who were around joining in.

Then came the universally hated warm up exercises (some obviously masochistic weekenders would join in). We rolled our heads, rotated our arms; bent backwards, forward, sideways, in ways our bodies were not designed for; squatted, stretched, twisted. Jumping jacks. We did it all, except for exercises requiring lying on the ground. As difficult as it is to admit, it made sense. It woke us up, loosening all muscles in preparation for the physical activity of the day ahead. I doubt if anyone ever pulled a muscle during gymnastics/tumbling later in the morning. Such warm-ups (even more important as one becomes older) became a life-long habit before all sports and I don't think I ever pulled a muscle. Of course, all this was done with an ear for the breakfast bell— release --we wouldn't want to keep the cook waiting, would we? Generally we would line up and walk in a more or less controlled manner to the mess hall. There was the occasional run, or even race, down the field, but always an orderly entry.

Breakfast, as all meals, was taken sitting on benches at long tables. In the early days Teach would sit at the head and the camp counselor at the other end. The practice was to stand in front of our seats, quiet down and wish one another good appetite (“bon appetite”) in Czech (“ Dobre chutnany prejemy vam”), which, needless to say the non-Czech speakers mangled. So be it. This ritual, repeated before all meals, instilled a bit of politeness and brought otherwise rowdy kids under control before they were allowed to line up at the food counter. No hats during meals and shirts were de rigueur— and it was a trip back to the barracks if you forgot one. No jumping up and down at the table, no food fights, take your dishes away—it was a tight ship. When finished you could stay at the table to talk, but those wanting to goof off had to go outside. The rules applied at all meals.

We generally ate well—basic, but nutritious stuff. For breakfast-- cereals (cooked and dry), copious amounts of milk, french toast on occasion, eggs (?). Lunch was the main meal – always meats-- roast pork, veal (rizek—snitzel), chicken -- potatoes or dumplings, vegetables etc. To drink there was the famous (and excellent) camp ice tea, made from a recipe apparently passed on for decades: strong tea and various fruit juices mixed in a huge pot, cooled by block of ice. It was not unknown for the guys to try to outdo one another, drinking 20 cups or more in a sitting. Suppers were lighter – franks and beans was probably the favorite—and various concoctions made from leftovers at lunch. Seconds were generally available, but only if plates had been cleaned? No Cokes at meals— even if you wanted to pay for it.

But there were some dreaded meals in the early 1950's. The cook at the time didn't seem to be aware that the flame on the stove could be turned down and with unerring regularity burnt the oatmeal, which could only be partially salvaged by drowning it in milk. What to do with burnt chicken a la king? My wife once tempted divorce by (unknowingly) proposing chicken a la king (as “something different” she said). I eventually consented to try and what a difference it made without a burnt crust!. We have it from time to time, but I still instinctively recoil—these things leave scars. Then there were dumplings (knedliks)—left over from Sunday, diced and fried in eggs (really!). This would hardly seem like a winning dish under any circumstances, but when served dry and burnt, it was probably the only occasion when some opted to walk off hungry. This would be the time to dive into one's personal stash of cookies (if one's parents had been thoughtful enough to pack them) or tough it out until candy bars could be bought at “store” in the evening. Tales of camp food are legend -- these things stay with you, even 60 years later.

After breakfast we prepared for the daily cleaning of the barracks and inspection. Everyone had to lend a hand. Suitcases were lifted onto beds to allow the floors to be swept, waste paper baskets were emptied and comic books were arranged somewhere. Beds were made—sleeping bags straightened out or blankets tucked in (no electric blankets), towels hung out to dry. We stood at attention while the counselor checked things out. Occasionally, he would ask someone to open a suitcase to ensure a wet bathing suit, inevitably full of sand, had not been tucked away

under fresh clothes. Lockers might be checked – to dispose of any animals that had taken up residence among cookies and half eaten candy bars.

Then it was time for tumbling or gymnastics. Mats were hauled out. We did cartwheels, headstands (tried handstands), somersaults, situps, pushups, etc. Or we would work apparatus-- parallel bars, side horse, the low horizontal bars (the high one for the older kids), and rings. To those of us who attended Sokol during the school year, much of this was familiar, for some it was a new experience so there was some instruction and always spotting.

It took a while for everyone to change for swimming, get their junk and line up (lots of whistle blowing). We walked down the field, crossed the road, went single file across a field (a privileged crossing of private property) and along Edgewater Dr to the beach. Those of us who stayed at the camp for a week or more rarely put shoes on (only for hikes and maybe for dances) so our feet were tough enough to handle the gravel road. From time to time the village would spray the road with a heavy black oil, which kept the dust down but forced the barefooted onto peoples' lawns. The rest of the morning was spent at the beach, and we would return to the camp in time to change. It was a hard and fast rule – wait around the barracks until the bell and walk together to the mess hall (which also allowed for a counting of heads). No going to the messhall in advance to horse around and annoy the kitchen staff.

Afternoons

By this time lunch finished it was often was stiflingly hot -- time to crash in the barracks, read comics and listen to the radio until it was time for the afternoon swim or a hike.

My age group's camp years corresponded to the explosion of great music in the 1950-1960s, probably never to be repeated. There was always a radio on in the barracks, tuned to one of the Chicago rock and roll stations (WJJD, WLS am). And there were generally no adults around to tell us to turn it off. I got in the habit of having a radio in the background. At home, I would tune in to the same stations, but Dad objected to the use of his radio for my stuff, as though Elvis' voice would somehow corrupt the circuitry. Many camp folk were enthusiastic "first adopters" of new technologies—sporting some of the first portable radios. They were the size of a cigar box, and weighed a few pounds—much of which was a (non-rechargeable) battery. Nevertheless, they got hauled around everywhere, to the beach and on hikes, often glued to someone's ear.

It was here that I first encountered a strange phenomenon – a Top 20 hit with lyrics in a foreign language. Ritchie Valens sang *La Bamba*. We couldn't understand a word and probably no one had any idea of what Spanish is (all this prior to the Latino arrival, needless to say). But it was popular and Jim M. bought the LP, which someone later sat on in the barracks (always dangerous to leave anything on a bed). Since then music in various languages easily circles the globe, mostly in English and probably Spanish. My favorite café here has Radio Swiss Pop blaring all the time and virtually all the music is in English (by Swiss artists as well). I sometimes wonder how many people understand any of the words. The observation from camp is confirmed here – if folk like the sound they listen – whether they understand the lyrics or not– and yes they play *La Bamba* from time to time.

Evenings

In the evening there was "store" at which we could buy a choice of candy bars and Coke. Parents could leave cash with their kids, but most put spending money on account with the counselor (also to pay for crafts). Later, attendance at flag lowering was mandatory—as was silence; and no screwing or fidgeting around. We took turns folding the flag according to US military protocol. Two of us would hold it by the corners, fold it twice lengthwise, stars on the bottom. Starting at the striped end, it was folded in triangles—stars ending up on the top. I wonder how many people, aside from the scouts and some military, are familiar with the exact procedure?

Evening activities varied according to the day of the week, but generally lights went out at 10 pm—counselor came around to ensure that all were in bed and quiet. There always seemed to be reasons to get up, poke someone, to get something from somewhere. There was always talk, and occasionally someone was around who could tell a good story or dirty jokes. A ghost story might elicit some whimpering from the young kids-- who slipped down into their bags. Hard to believe now. Counselor would often lurk outside, to intervene if things were getting out of hand. .

The upper bunks in the boy's barracks were remarkably high (at least they seemed so at the time). There were no ladders so you stepped on the lower bunk, perhaps on someone's face, to get up. There were no guard rails, and it was not unusual to be woken by a body falling from a top bunk--a big thud, followed by a moan and/or curse, then the noise of someone extricating himself from the sleeping bag, putting it back on the bed and getting in, all in the dark. Amazingly, no one ever seemed to be hurt after the plunge, perhaps because one falls relaxed (or at least that's what is said).

One tends to forget now how cold it gets at night in the country. We are used urban environments where masonry buildings and asphalt streets absorb heat, much of which is retained during the night. Among the wooden buildings and greenery, temperatures fell quickly as soon as the sun went down. In the morning, after a clear night, we would step on the field covered with heavy dew—no point in wearing shoes—cold and refreshing. Now whenever I step barefoot on wet grass I am conveyed to these mornings at camp and enjoy the memory.

An activity for every evening

Sunday was the day of arrival/departure for most kids, registration, visits from parents, so there were comings and goings all day long. In the morning someone would drive kids to the churches in Crystal Lake. Otherwise, the daily routine applied to those campers whose parents had not yet arrived—this meant beach time or something else to keep us out of trouble. The newcomers arrived full of energy, not yet tired from a full day of activities. Despite the warnings-- no one out of bed, no flashlights, no talking, no venturing out the barracks and so on after lights out, the group had a tough time settling down. Counselor might have to come in a few times

Monday evening we generally hiked around the lake, a distance of 4-5 miles (the lake itself being about a mile and a half long). On Lake Ave we passed the Sokol and Grafton beaches, turned into South Shore drive, which passed through a residential area bordering the lake (thus avoid the traffic on Lake avenue). At the municipal ("big") beach we headed east to the McDonald's on Rte14 – it must have been one of the earliest and had only walkup service. After stuffing ourselves, we continued on North Shore Drive. Unfortunately, the geniuses in the zoning office had failed to plan a through road on this side of the lake (certainly disadvantaging the residents). For us it was a matter of sneaking through a certain yard to meet the road beyond (perhaps Timberhill Dr; for a time we may have had permission to pass through the yard). Despite kids often being strung out for a block or more during the hike we never lost anyone, at least permanently. Often we got back after dark. If the newcomers were not tired before the hike, they were afterwards and the barracks were quiet that night. It may all have been a cunning plan devised years before – get them tired out with a full day of activities and then hit them with a long hike in the evening. This may have been the real, but unspoken, objective of the Monday night hikes.

Tuesday evenings were devoted to crafts. Frank may have introduced the choice of crafts -- leather wallets, coin purses, etc – involving stitching cutout pieces together; also molding and painting plaster figurines. Perhaps the most popular was braiding—if that is the term – using colored plastic-covered string to make bracelets, key and adjustable whistle chains (I still have my whistle chain). Even a dog leash was possible. The key was to measure out the right length of material for each item and get the braiding started correctly. After that care and perseverance was required to avoid twisting the flat strands. On Sunday kids could say, "See folks, I didn't completely waste all my time at camp". I was recently surprised when my granddaughters were doing the same thing, though now the material is a translucent plastic with embedded glitter – got to jazz things up a bit—but the strands are so thin as to virtually preclude making the items that we did.

Wednesday was movie night. Every year, some unsung hero on the camp committee chose and ordered the films for the season. Each week the mailman would arrive with a large armored box containing two huge reels of 16 mm film – for a ninety minute movie (hard to believe). Windows in the mess hall were covered. A projector and screen were set up in the mess hall and we loaded up with extra candy and Cokes at store. Intermissions occurred when breaks in the film needed to be spliced and the reels changed.

Thursday, dance day, was dreaded by the boys and looked forward to by the girls. They girls hauled out their dresses and got all primed up— scary heads full of hair curlers were seen. The guys reluctantly dug deep into their suitcases

for clean shirts and slacks; socks and shoes were found. Hair got combed. In the mess hall tables were moved and chairs lined up on the sides of the dance floor. Needless to say, the girls sat on one side, guys on the other. The former, being innately more aggressive took things into their own hands and would haul the guys onto the floor--the age old practice. Counselors always took a hard line-- guys had to dance. So we tried. Girls would lead. Against our wills we learned (more or less) the box step, jitterbug, stroll, twist, cha-cha, to snake around the hall and who knows what else. Hard to admit but it was useful later, but none of the boys would have made John Travolta worry.

Friday/Saturday—A night for a bon fire. During the week boxes and papers from the kitchen were hauled to the fire pit. Occasionally, instead of swimming we would go to the neighboring woods to gather firewood. Fallen branches would be cut up with axes and hand saws, dragged to camp or, in the case of really big stuff, tied on a boat trailer. It still puzzles me why we chopped down a tree since it would have taken a long time to dry out (who owned the woods anyway?). The fire was started at dusk, and folks circled around on blankets and chairs. There would be marsh mellows and, when it was in season, sweet corn. Someone would buy dozens of ears from a local farmer and soak them in cold water for the day. The roasted corn was memorable for its freshness and sweetness. Lying on the blankets (a short distance from the fire) the Milky Way was clearly visible, and it was here that many of us saw our first satellite – still a novelty then.

In addition to the Monday night lake walk, we might do another hike or two. “Willow Creek” was a favorite destination, through the woods and then west along Ill 176. The creek, perhaps more an agricultural drainage ditch that flowed under the road, was marked by a large willow tree. We descended the embankment looking for crayfish, small fish and frogs. It was a beautiful spot -- fast flowing, clean water and some wildlife, all in the shade of the willow – very welcoming on a hot Illinois afternoon. Amazing in retrospect, we walked on the shoulder of the interstate, two or three abreast, with cars whizzing by at 65 mph (or more). We were careful and warned from time to time to stay a distance from the actual roadway. Once again, no messing around. Another, closer destination was the creek emanating from a large underground pipe and emptying into the north shore of the lake. (Where Honeysuckle drive ends at Pinewood Dr.). The strong outflow and the then high lake level made a nice channel, deep enough to float a boat.

Sports were, of course, central to camp life. They were arranged as part of the program for the day or on a pickup basis. It was not unusual to see ball or horseshoe games arise spontaneously; similarly a few people would start to work on the various gymnastics apparatus (men and women on their respective apparatus) and others might join in. It showed real love for these activities and personal motivation to improve skills. We tried out high jumping—using the old scissors kick, if one can believe that. But the low sawdust landing pit precluded other jump styles. When I was older Tony K. brought javelin, and I got to try an event that is not normally available.

Sometimes rain was welcome---first of all the opportunity to sleep in a bit and no morning exercises – a break from the otherwise full days. It meant running to the mess hall for meals, between raindrops. There might be crafts at the mess hall during the day to keep us out of trouble. But mostly it was a matter of lying around the barracks playing cards and reading comic books, which in itself was something to look forward to. Most campers brought a few from home and they circulated freely. Newly arrived kids meant new (unread) comic books! It was a boon when one Sokol arrived from the military with a shopping bag full! We devoured the exploits of all the superheros of the time-- Superman (girl, boy, woman?), Batman and Robin, Green Lantern, Wonder Woman, Spiderman; all the Walt Disney stuff, Classic comics and who knows what else (amazingly some of the superheros are still with us and my grandkids have a hard time believing that they date to so long ago). In any case we read them all. Some of us learned card games--initially Fish, war, and then 500 rummy and poker. One year Frank donated his collection of Strength and Health magazines (It motivated me to become a long time subscriber). There was no TV, which may have been an advantage.

Inevitably, a camp environment -- blankets around the campfire, hikes (lead to holding hands), back rubs on the beach spawned summer loves. They could be fleeting, as most are (“it seemed like a good idea at the time”), very serious, and even resulting in (a surprising percentage) of marriages. As we got older we were more aware of the camp girls as well as town girls who seemed to appear more with more frequency.

Mudhole (aka Sokol Summer Home Beach)

The camp gets its own beach

In my early days we swam at Grafton Park (now West Park), on the southwest side of the lake. It may have been privately owned or belonged to what was then Lakewood (a non-incorporated village). There was a long stretch of shaded picnic area on the waterfront—with a beach and snack bar at the eastern end. It was great—the beach had a sandy bottom, pier, raft and an outstanding, high slide. We dove from the pier—swam to the raft (though I think fights were prohibited), and went down the slide in every possible position. Perhaps to keep out non-residents, the park was fenced in and admission charged. At first Sokol members were admitted in return for picking up papers—we walked around with nail-tipped staffs spearing every wrapper in sight. Apparently, this wasn't enough and the arrangement was discontinued.

Fortunately, the Sokol owned (or was able to buy?) a lot adjacent to Grafton, on the SW corner of the lake (2.5 acres). It was a good location—on Lake/North Ave (across from Montrym's general store) with easy access to the camp and ample parking. We were to be in business again? Not so fast. The west side of the lake is shallow, with a deep layer of mud (it had been pumped there by the owner of the Point property?). Inevitably, some irreverent soul labeled it "mudhole"—amusing to the kids, but a marketing challenge for the Camp Committee. Sand was quickly brought in creating a nice beach on land, but in the lake it tended to sink below the mud. Still it was a big improvement. Beyond the sandy area it was possible to walk thirty or forty yards out, sinking into the muck up to one calves with each step. There the lake bottom was strewn with broken bottles, rusted cans, nails, and other horrible stuff left behind by ice fisherman. I was lucky to venture out a few times without a scratch. But others came back with scrapes and cuts—some requiring treatment. In fact for years swimmers continued to find stuff. During at least one season Frank offered a free Coke for every 10 (!) pieces of glass, metal, and nail fished out. And there were a lot of free Cokes. One can imagine kids enthusiastically explaining to their parents that they had been lucky enough to earn several Cokes! Often Frank himself could be seen poling a boat outside the swim area looking for stuff on the bottom (very clear water anyway).

The plant-covered shallows were a boon for snorkeling— all of us had masks, fins and snorkels and would cruise the lake far out looking for creatures and treasures---- I found an ice axe, fishing rods (unusable) and who knows what else. With all this time underwater, we learned to relax and breath properly --- always useful skills. Many of us learned to swim well and years later tried to swim the length of the lake (about 1 ½ miles) -- I got leg cramps with about ¼ mile to go.

Eventually the camp committee decided to deepen the swimming area. A guy with a dredge was found -- he talked a good game. The mud was to be dug out with a scoop propelled by a system of cables and pulleys. The left cable was attached to a very large scoop anchored far out in the lake and the right one to a monster tree on the shore of Grafton Park. A diesel powered a winch pulled the scoop back and forth, from lake to shore, gouging out mud with each journey. An area not far from shore was deepened to 7-8 feet, enough for diving from a raft. I understand that the scoop eventually got stuck out in the lake bringing the project to a close. Somehow the guy managed to extricate his equipment and took off. Mudhole 1- Dredge 0.

Despite the rough beginning the beach became well used and loved. More sand was brought in. During the day swimmers would stir up the bottom a bit, but every night a miracle took place, and by the morning water cleared perfectly, the lake truly living up to its name—Crystal Lake. It is one of my favorite memories—arriving at the beach in the morning before the sun got really hot, wading into the cool clear water and swimming to the raft.

The main purpose of the raft was for raft fights (king of the raft), though sun bathers were observed from time to time. It's truly remarkable that for all the fighting and falling on the hard wooden top that no one got seriously hurt. The uncontrollable urge to push someone into the water must be hard-wired in human kind (at least the male of the species). On Sundays the raft seemed to beg to be tipped over. Virtually everyone piled on, moved in unison from one side to another to get it swaying, but despite the heroic efforts it never flipped (which is just as well—what were we thinking?).

Beach time wasn't only for raft fights, lying around, listening to the radio and sunbathing. One year we practiced handstands on two metal bedposts that someone drove into the ground. Even some of the middle-aged visitors – former gymnasts-- tried their luck—show the kids how it's done. Another year a horizontal bar was erected. A volleyball net was put up another year on hard ground-- the awesome possibilities of beach volleyball in deep sand were not yet thought of.

Snacks and drinks were bought at Montrym's general store across the road. After weekends we picked up empty glass soda bottles and returned them for the deposit – 2 cents each; five empties for a soda.

Thinking it might have beach potential, I managed to liberate an old inner tube (patched) from one of the semi-trailer trucks that use to park near our home in Chicago. It was huge, floated high and 4-5 of us were able to sit on it (with our legs in the center). Or we would try to stand up on it, not succeeding for more than a few seconds. It was a great toy, but tedious to haul back and forth from the camp. I hid it in the bushes, but eventually it got ripped off. The end of a good time

As a treat we were occasionally taken to the Crystal Lake municipal beach ("big beach") at the other side of the lake, guys with cars ferrying us back and forth. This was to avoid the hefty parking fee (\$3 around the mid-1950s) presumably designed to keep Chicago folk and other non-residents out. The beach there was long and sandy with only a raft and pier. Not much, but I suppose the change made it attractive.

For us city kids the first day at the beach might be our first time in the sun without a top. We went all day, often unprotected by sunblock or the greasy creams sold then. So it was not unusual to see a bunch of lobsters that evening. Before I smartened up I was among those who got big round blisters on my shoulders. In recent years there has been a mushrooming of melanoma, especially in the sun states (but also in Switzerland). I know several people (in California and Florida) who have come down with it. Despite having a fair complexion and had serious burns I have not developed this form of cancer. I don't think that any of the camp people did – has something changed? depletion of the ozone layer? Now I avoid the direct sun.

We learn to waterski

Thanks to at least two of the older campers we had a rare opportunity to learn to waterski. I often appreciate this when I see someone on the lake here cutting across the waves. It's not always easy to maintain a boat – securing a slip, transport, paying for fees, licenses, winter storage, motor overhaul and so on. Or big bucks for rental. We probably got our start behind Bill S's aluminum boat, actually a large rowboat that took an outboard motor. His (relatively low power) 10 hp Mercury was probably all it could handle, and it struggled to pull up a skier up (as did the skier). But once you were up it was fine. Thank you Bill, wherever you are.

Later came Joe K's fully fledged motorboat. I think Joe assembled it from a kit – a magnificent job of finishing, all the joints were smooth, screw holes well caulked, nicely varnished, etc. A work of art – even as a kid I appreciated it. The 25 hp Johnson motor easily pulled us up and we zoomed across lake, virtually flying when we skimmed over the waves to the side. It didn't take long to do the full 1 ½ mile length of the lake. Joe often let us drive – it always a thrill— he being contented to sit on a gunwale and enjoy the lake. Heartfelt thanks, Joe (and I hope the boat lives).

Motorboats were largely for weekends or when the owners were present on their vacations. Otherwise there was always a rowboat or two. The creek (emanating from an underground pipe) on the north side of the lake was a favorite destination – it was then deep enough to row or pole over 100 yards upstream. It was a beautiful spot, clear water, shaded by large overhanging trees and the occasional wildlife. One year Tony K. let us use his state-of-the-art fiberglass canoe. Sadly, it burned (chained to a fence) when a neighbor set a brush fire to clear his property. Only a bent aluminum frame and chain remained.

Outhouse Tales

Is this really an appropriate topic? Doesn't it offend our modern sensibility just to mention the notion of a communal toilet? Perhaps, but not insignificant elements of camp life through the early 1950s centered on wooden outhouses

(sadly lacking the requisite half-moons). Skipping the topic would be like missing the public latrines on a tour of an ancient Roman city (often the highlight). Though our humble facilities could hardly be compared to spacious, marble-lined Roman johns, there are some mentionable social parallels. Romans would start their day by heading to a public latrine (during the winter the wealthy would send a slave ahead to sit bare-assed and warm up one of the 30-40 stone seats). In addition to the intended business, it was a social occasion-- folks would get the latest news, conduct business, gossip and so on. No doubt all this caused some to tardy, annoying the needy and impatient waiting in line. Indeed it is in just such a setting that the expression "shit or get off the pot" may first have been heard. But I diverge.

The camp had three such facilities: the men's had 3 holes and an adjacent urinal open to the sky. The ladies' latrine boasted 4 holes, the design showing sophisticated thinking, far ahead of its time. Ladies, for reasons known only to them, require more toilet capacity than men. Serious recent surveys indicate an optimal ratio of 2 women's to 1 men's, an ideal ratio still rarely achieved by (male) architects. Neither the men's nor the women's had partitions, thus promoting the free flow of conversation. There was also a single seat outhouse near the mess hall which on weekends and during bus tours took the overflow (if that is the appropriate term) from the luxury flush toilets in the mess hall. To my knowledge the this single seater was never tipped over with someone inside, something I'm told the folks in Minnesota and Wisconsin never tired of doing.

Friends, especially the ladies, often visited the facilities in packs, apparently thinking nothing of it (Rome may not be as distant as we think). Curiously, the ladies' toilet was just behind the boy's barracks, and the men's toilet was half way down the field toward the mess hall. Presumably this seemingly quirky configuration was dictated by two considerations: the ladies toilet could not be placed behind the women's barracks because it would have bordered one of two public roads and, second, the next closest possible location was behind the men's barracks. This made it as convenient as possible for the ladies, but relegating the men down the field. So be it -- better than to listen to complaints for the foreseeable future (and these undoubtedly came anyway). Perhaps someone remembers if this was indeed the logic behind the odd placement.

Anyway, the point is that this arrangement also gave rise to some curious comings and goings. Without fail -- shortly after lights out -- some ladies inevitably felt the need (or said they did), and the boys would be waiting at the windows of their barracks. First we would see the beams of flashlights, followed by the appearance of ghostly figures, slowly gliding across the field (always dressed in funny nightgowns). They had to pass the south side of the boy's barracks, at which time the windows popped open and the guys herded around. Evidently neither sex had had enough time during the day to say what needed to be said and there were long conversations, lots of giggles and taunts. Also predictably, the counselor was waiting in the shadows ready to break this up and order everyone back to bed. Of course the girls claimed, more or less legitimately, that they couldn't help it -- that there was no alternative; the scene was repeated throughout the years, an integral part of camp life.

The combination of distance of the outdoor toilets (50-60 meters?) and typically cold nights posed a dilemma in the early hours of the morning. What to do? Dash across the cold dew-laden field or go just outside the barracks and quickly slide back into a warm sack? There is no memory of anyone actually doing the right thing at 3am. Teach could be seen the next morning, grumbling, spreading lime on spots outside the barracks. And where did he go at night after a beer or so before bedtime?

All this fun came to an end when flush toilets were installed inside the barracks -- prompted by new municipal health regulations? actions of a kill joy intent on stopping the nightly sorties? convenience? Or did Teach simply insist, tired of spreading lime? (turns out there was an septic tank presumably installed by the previous property owner).

Our later years

Prior to my senior year in high school Jim M., Jerry R. and I worked at the camp in return for room and board. Frank M. was counselor. There was always maintenance work to do as well as helping with the camp kids: shepherding them to the beach, keeping them together on hikes (or at least making sure they came back), lifeguard duty, giving boat rides (it was best to sit in the back and let the kids row), helping with games and gymnastics, whatever. At the

end of that summer we were sent to a Sokol instructors course at Camp Town of Lake (then in far southwestern suburbs of Chicago).

When we got older a few of us would take the train from Chicago—a rather long journey. We took the CTA to the Northwestern Station in downtown, the Metro to downtown Crystal Lake which was a 3-4 mile walk to the camp. Maybe we should have taken a cab – I wonder if we ever priced it. Eventually we got cars. Despite the new freedom we kept going back to the camp – which must say something. We hung together for several weeks each summer until our early 20s when jobs took us elsewhere

I became camp counselor for the 1964 season (at nearly age 20, probably a bit older than Frank when he started). Ms K. was head cook again (which meant great food and overeating). Three junior girls Sandy and Patty (then Z.) and Sandy (then S.) were taken on to help with the kitchen and wash dishes. Apparently I didn't annoy them enough since they compiled a scrapbook of my imagined activities which I have kept all these years, through several moves. It's here somewhere

After spending so many summers there, the routine of the camp was pretty much in my blood. In general, new directors (of virtually anything) like to change things to leave their imprint, but I didn't give much thought to doing that. The established routine, thanks largely to Frank, was flexible and worked well. Lots depends on the capabilities and personality of the counselor – for example, some folks might do more crafts, but I am not very creative so I doubt new ground was broken that year. In some places they sing --- but I can't; ditto for putting on skits and plays. In earlier years we complained that there was no archery—so I brought my bow and we set up a target somewhere. But the bow was weak in one spot and it broke after a couple of weeks. Strict rules were observed and no one got shot. We did a crude decathlon— determining winners by somehow adding up the performances from foot races, the high jump, shotput (what did we throw?), javelin (a broom) and who knows what else. Someone had hauled my weights out so some kids got introduced to weight training.

Miscellaneous Reflections

Recently (early 2013) I read an obituary of a distant acquaintance who, with his wife, had established a camp for couples in Michigan. From the (on-line) entries by fellow campers he came across as an exceptional person—welcoming, bringing out the best in others, entertaining, caring – a real loss to his family and to all who knew him. Anyway, it is striking how much these people enjoyed their camp experience, many coming back every summer (even years after he, the nucleus of the group, was gone). The facilities were modest with the usual camp offerings of camp—swimming, boating, various ball games, etc.-- during the day and evenings were together in the community house; their activities and experiences recall ours of 50-70 years ago. I was surprised. In this day and age when getting away means Disneyland, Vegas, cruises, tours, specialist camps (baseball, music) or family camping, the notion of a “general” camp might seem quaint, even obsolete. But the success of the Michigan camp shows that it can still be an enjoyable, rewarding experience. I might add that it operates entirely on a fee basis—weeks/weekends are devoted completely to fun—no work to be done. I wonder if it could function on a volunteer system for 6 weeks a year as our camp did?

I suppose that a camp experience can be special because it is a meeting of the willing, people who are comfortable together (common background such as the Sokol/neighborhood may help), people who can enjoy a simple life style and are attracted by the outdoors/sports activities. Extended stays mean more time is available—no need to leave early and drive home, allowing for evenings to be enjoyed. Of course, as with vacations in general one can relax, escape the daily routine and leaving behind the irritations of life.

I think that most would agree that the camp promoted a healthy life style – physically, mentally and socially. Many kids seem underprivileged now – they are often sedentary, overweight, fed pills to keep their heads on strait, or withdrawing into a world of electronic games and on-line “relationships.” The camp seemed to organized around a few interrelated tenets: first the Sokol philosophy that the body should be exercised and developed, starting at an

early age. Second, that exuberant youthful energy needs to be positively channeled—hence the program of instruction and vigorous physical activity that also got kids out of the city where there was little to do (but ample opportunity for trouble – which I started to exploit at an early age). Our immediate neighborhood in Chicago was a desert for kids—no pools or parks; one could play in the streets, among parked cars or in the alleys, up on the railroad tracks— and later our part of Berwyn was not much better. It made sense for my parents to make the financial sacrifice to send me away for the summer and I am indebted to them for that.

We learned to live with others in close quarters – not bad preparation for military service or college. Mutual respect was also an ingredient, reflected in, for example, the expectation of civil behavior at meal times, including wearing tops. How many of us have been put off in an eatery by a sweating, barebacked slob, or had a restaurant meal disrupted by monster kids, running, jumping up and down, screaming at tables? It was taken as given that all should be able to converse and enjoy a meal without disruption. You took your dirty dishes away—the world was not there to serve you. It seems that in restaurants most people pay more attention to their electronic gadgets than they do to their companions. I suspect that if cell phones had existed at the time, they would have been prohibited at our meals.

I've thought about the comments of the parents of repeat camper who had a syndrome the name of which I no longer remember. He was extremely intelligent – he knew a great deal about computers well before most people were aware of them. However, he seems to have had some psychological issues and a strange lack of coordination—working with him on apparatus or tumbling was like spotting a sack of potatoes. But he was treated like the others and made to try everything. At the beach he got his share of dunking (pretty frightening for him) and the abuse that kids dish out to one another. but he was remarkably good natured about it all and was not deterred. Anyway, despite (or because of) this challenging environment, his parents said that he progressed more during his annual stay at camp than he did during all his treatment the rest of the year. It was an interesting tribute to him and to the camp.

Because the camp was in a built-up area, there was always the risk of annoying the neighbors. Their homes were close, just across the road or a field. We could also have wreaked havoc during our daily walk along Edgewater Dr to the beach; and the lakefront house adjoining the beach itself (which had a nice pier) could have been a tempting target. We made our share of noise—games, water fights, counselors' whistles, meal bells, night raids on the barracks and occasionally heavy partying in the mess hall on weekend evenings. Some of us played hide and seek in the woods (there were several houses) on some nights breaking the silence with catcalls and taunts. As far as I know none of the neighbors ever complained. Perhaps they knew that camp kids never trespassed, broke in, vandalized, threw beer bottles on their lawns, chased their cats and so on. My impression is that people tolerate noise (or at least did) if they are confident that there is no danger and their property will not be violated. I don't think we ever broke that trust. Waynes on Edgewater Dr. did call once about the prolonged yelling on the beach (which may have been me).

Amazingly, everyone ate the same thing, or put differently, there was a single meal on offer at mealtime. You ate that or you went hungry –not a matter of choosing between Czech, Chinese, Tex-Mex, salad bar, sushi, vegetarian, low fat, decaf coffee/tea –whatever. It's difficult to imagine running a camp today given the different tastes to be accommodated and the apparently high incidence of lactose intolerant, peanut butter allergic, gluten phobic, bulimic, overweight, diabetic kids. Did zely (cooked cabbage) ever cause a cardiac shutdown on a Sunday? I suppose that if the menu disagreed, people never came back; or they could have tried their luck complaining to the gentleman selling the dinner tickets on Sunday, or to the head cook, in both cases at a safe distance.

In the early 1950s there was talk of polio in the city – not only in Chicago but in some of the more well to do suburbs as well (Hinsdale comes to mind). Summer was polio season, but thankfully the camp escaped. It has been decades since the Salk vaccine and it is hard to imagine now the fear triggered by that disease which seemingly struck at will. Even at our tender age we were well aware of what the disease wrought – atrophied limbs and often total dependence. It meant confinement to iron lungs (remember those?) ie imprisonment up to one's neck in a horizontal cylinder, always on ones back with a mirror above the face to view people standing behind you. Some time ago I was starkly reminded of this (and the talk at camp) seeing a picture of a huge room filled with row upon row of iron lungs – it took my breath away. All prisoners without hope of cure. But such pictures were common in the 1950s. I think of them when I read about the mullahs in sub-Saharan Africa and the Taliban in Pakistan playing games with polio, the former

denying girls vaccination (it's a western plot to sterilize Muslims) and the latter claiming vaccinations are "un-Islamic". Whatever.

Stuff has circulated on the internet pointing out the exaggerated perception of risk that has become common (eg resulting in no bike riding or playing ball without a helmet; certain death if you eat or drink this or that, and so on). While many of the new rules and prohibitions make sense, it is striking that we did so many things that would now be considered as very risky: swimming to the middle of the lake without an accompanying boat; boating without life preservers for all (or for anyone), hiking along the shoulder of a major highway (Rte 176) and hiking at night stretched out over a block or two; sawing chopping and gathering firewood in the woods; informal archery. But there was never a serious problem if I remember correctly (admittedly scrapes and cuts in the swimming area and the occasional kid falling off a top bunk can be scary to reflect on). I suppose that the lack of trouble was due to care and judgment (a careful assessment of risks): only very good swimmers were allowed to swim out in the lake or ride in a boat without a life preserver; kids were carefully monitored on the walks along the highway; there was always attentive spotting during gymnastics, and so on. Frank once confiscated and burned a duffle bag full of fireworks from a camp newcomer (before they could be blown off who knows where). It's interesting now to reflect on nineteen year old (or younger) counselors with responsibility for all the kids. Somehow it worked -- without a nurse, psychologist, nutritionist, public relations expert, a lawyer on retainer....

Its only in retrospect that I have become fully aware of the patriotism shown in certain Sokol activities. There were the daily flag ceremonies and the Pledge of Allegiance, both carried out with the proper decorum. Many of the older campers had served in the US military during WWII, and some of the younger ones had enlisted in the Marines or in NROTC. I recall an editorial by instructor Ed L. (Sokol Tabor in Berwyn) in a Sokol magazine evoking the importance of patriotism. I wondered about it at the time -- there was no war in progress -- but it was not unusual. I was also surprised when I attended a Sokol meeting with my mother (probably one of the last of Havlicek Tyrs) that opened with the Pledge of Allegiance (which I hadn't heard in years). Whether at such a meeting or at the camp, the pledge wasn't necessary, and was not part of a business model as one suspects the national anthem is sometimes. It was genuine and matter of fact—presumably reflecting an appreciation for the US by many generations -- those who took part in the immigrations of the early 20th century (and earlier), their children --second, third and fourth generation Americans, and more recently the families that escaped Communism after World War II. All understood that they had a better life in the US than would have been possible in Europe.

I remember seeing my first death -- that of Mr T--one of the old Sokols who came out from time to time with his wife. She used to sew and sell Sokol uniforms from their place in the Pilsen neighborhood in Chicago. It was a sunny weekend morning and he was lending a hand, cleaning up and raking after the bonfire of the night before. Then he collapsed, perhaps because of a heart attack or stroke, and someone ran to the mess hall fetch Mrs. T and to ring an ambulance. By the time it reached him, he was gone. I think it was only when the ambulance arrived that we realized that something exceptional had happened. Out of respect, someone had the presence of mind to get us kids away, into the barracks (where we watched the drama through the windows). After he taken away Mrs. T walked back to the mess hall, in tears, supported by some of the other ladies. A beautiful morning was marred by the passing of a member. As I recalled this incident many years later, I was struck by the fact that here was a camper working, still contributing even at his advanced age. No one would have faulted him for finding chair in the shade and just watching things go by. But that was not the style of many of the members. It stands in contrast to my neighbors in the apartment complex who will not lift a finger—if our cleaning service doesn't pick something up it stays there. Only recently did it occur to me how he died ---with dignity, in the sunshine, quickly, near friends in a place that he loved. Everyone should all be so fortunate.

On a related note, after my father died in 1994 many of the campers came to his funeral, though he really wasn't engaged in the camp. It was a nice show of compassion for my mother, a long-time member, and for me, even though I hadn't been around for nearly 20 years.

It is often said that we look upon the past with nostalgia—"the good old days", remembering the good and often forgetting or even repressing memories of unpleasant events. And if that isn't enough it has been discovered that the

mind even makes up events—perhaps a mechanism that somehow makes it easier to deal with ourselves. It may well be that this essay is an exercise in all of the above, but I don't think so (being the purely objective creature that I am!!!). Certainly there were unpleasant things – in the early years there were the instances of the occasional bad food; the dangerous stuff in the swimming area; some complained of the absence of a swimming pool or being required to work (eg on the rare occasion, rake grass); at times everyone among the older generation seemed to be a boss (though the interventions were well intentioned and correct); or we were accused of being cliquish. Be that as it may, I think the experience for many of us was good, in fact, very good. I can only repeat that I wished that own kids (and now grandkids) had the same grand experience.

Epilogue

I've been back to the area of the camp twice since my last stay in 1966. In 1971, after I returned to Illinois, I took my very pregnant wife, Marjean, to visit the place where I had spent so much time. Of course it was closed and probably had been sold by then, but I wanted to take pictures of what was left. Strangely, in all the years that the family visited, we had not taken many, indeed frustratingly few of the people and things that interest me. It was toward the end of summer, the grass was yellow and uncut. From the mess hall, the barracks looked so small and lonely, all boarded up. No gymnastics or playground equipment was to be seen. Silence. Evidently, a memorable camp experience is much more than the physical facilities and activities -- it's the people and the times themselves, neither of which can be brought back exactly as they were.

As we walked around, it was hard to believe that so many generations had passed through—such good friendships, so much activity and fun, such a big part of growing up. It was difficult to convey all this to my wife. We proceeded up the hill to the woods, the place of so many hikes and scavenge for firewood. From a distance not much had changed, but in the woods themselves the underbrush had been beaten down--trails created by something knocking down everything in its way. It finally dawned on us that all this curious destruction had been wrought by off the road vehicles. I guess this is considered fun now – outdoor life—sit on a vehicle, zoom around, scare the hell out of wildlife and tear things up. In all those years of using the forest we always left it as we found it, minus some fallen branches (and the one tree we chopped down, which fortunately did not seem to be missed). Surprisingly, the beach area had been preserved as a park (then) Edgewater Park. A wooden stand had been built on the shore (and battered by lake ice).

I returned a few years ago armed with a digital camera ready to take pictures of all that was left. Even someone very familiar with the camp would have a hard time finding the exact location now (S's property is still identifiable, which helps to place it). A developer had come in, ripped out all the buildings, subdivided the land and dropped in rows of houses, including on what had been the vacant land to the east. Suburban sprawl had taken over. All local memory of the camp seems lost. I talked to an old woman living kiddy corner from where the women's barracks used to be, but she was surprised ---had no idea. How quickly places are forgotten.

The beach (Edgewater Park) had been subsequently been renamed Naoki Kamijima Park—curious. I Googled this later and found that Naoki was “a popular 48-year-old Crystal Lake shopkeeper who was killed in a shooting... a native of Japan who owned the General Store, 1309 North Ave., An outpouring of sorrow from a shocked community followed”². The general store is the former Montrym's across from the camp beach. It was determined to be a hate crime, according to the article: “On April 5, 1999, Douglas Vitaioli walked into a Crystal Lake grocery store and murdered Naoki Kamijima, the store's owner, simply because he was Asian. He told the police that he wanted to kill Asians out of a duty to God. In memorial, so that the residents of Crystal Lake would not soon forget the tragic consequence of intolerance, the city renamed Edgewater Park, on the western side of the lake, as Naoki Kamijima Park. The park is used by the Crystal Lake Rower's Club to store their boats, and for a starting point for rowing competitions.” No mention of the camp.

² April 10, 1999 By Tim Kane. [Chicago Tribune](#).

Goggle Earth gives a wonderful view of the Crystal Lake area and all the landmarks. I used Google street view to check out the beach area – the park is nicely maintained with playground equipment. You can see the lake at a distance and surprisingly there are two large offshore islands. I don't think the lake had ever been this low, even during the very hot summers in the early 1950s. Presumably it is due to the drought in parts of the middle west and the growing population which has sunk more wells. (I was told much later that water table at the camp was only ten feet down at the time).

There is still a gravel road leading up the woods. However the cornfield to the east is now a nature preserve. The woods seem to have recovered from the "sports" vehicles. A new circular road has been cut deep in the forest and several houses dropped in. It was sunny when I was there and they looked good among the tall trees – a very private and peaceful area. But what about the killer mosquitoes? Before building (or buying) had the folks been there at night and fought off the swarms? I was reminded of the night we tried to sleep there in a clearing, initially getting some respite smoking cheap cigars, but the pests got through everything and we gave up in the small hours of the morning and returned to camp. We could have been in the notorious Minnesota boundary waters. The new homeowners must have screens everywhere, avoid going out at night, racing to and from the car when it is unavoidable. Perhaps the dryer climate has made it more habitable.

Willow creek, passing under Ill 176, is no more and as is the signatory willow. The fields through which it passed have been re-contoured by plowing leaving at most a small drainage ditch. Sad after all the time we spent there.

The other creek, the one near the camp emanating from the pipe and emptying into the lake is a mere trickle now (also a victim of the draught, like willow creek?). No longer can one row a boat there and in fact the owners of the houses that now line the embankments might object. It is still a nice site—trees and all, but the creek as we knew it is gone.

The camp may be gone but its memory lives on.