

The Historical Perspective

Fresh Air for City Kids

The Early Years of Summer Camp

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“Thank you very much for sending me out here,” a New York City boy wrote from summer camp in 1910. “We sleep in open air tents. We had a picnic Thursday and I won a prize, we are also going to have one Monday. We are always playing ball out here ... we pick blackberries and people give us pears and apples.” Similar descriptions of country life can be found in thousands of letters from campers each summer. But this young New Yorker was not writing to his parents; instead, he was thanking a sponsor whose donation had paid for him, along with a group of other poor children from his neighborhood, to attend summer camp.

Charitable summer camps for poor children first opened in the U.S. in the 1870s and have operated every year since. Campers’ motivation for attending is not mysterious: they escape the city for a few weeks, play in nature, and make new friends. The motivation of

adults running the camps, however, has evolved along with the goals of the social-services community and cultural attitudes toward the poor, the city, and rural life. Camps are still evolving. Exploring the history of camps for underserved children can help us better understand their role in promoting child welfare today.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the forces of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization had created deep rifts between the housing and lifestyle of the rich and those of the poor in New York City. Poor children usually spent the hot



Camp administrators tried to give poor children the leisure opportunities that their wealthier peers enjoyed. The small boys in this image—including one on crutches—wear tattered clothes and pose in front of idyllic Car Pond at Lake Stahahe in Harriman State Park. Courtesy of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission Archives.

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summer in overcrowded, poorly ventilated apartments. With no public parks to relieve the congestion of the neighborhoods, children played in dirty streets. Wealthy children, however, escaped with their families to country houses or were sent north to the modified wilderness of summer camp.

In 1877 the Reverend William Parsons, himself recently transplanted from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Sherman, Pennsylvania, bemoaned the lack of outdoor leisure available to the children he had left behind in the city. That summer, Parsons placed about 60 children from Brooklyn slums with volunteer hosts among his new neighbors in rural Pennsylvania, where the children spent the summer playing outdoors and experiencing middle-class life. Parsons's project, soon named the Fresh Air Fund, quickly took off. By

1888 the organization was sending more than 10,000 New York City children a year to live with host families throughout the Northeast.

Organizations with similar missions soon materialized around the country. A New York City businessman, William George, began his own fresh-air program, bringing children out to camps in the country rather than to hosts' homes. In 1894 George organized these camps into what he called Junior Republics. Campers were supposed to develop leadership skills and a work ethic by earning food and lodging through their labor around the camp. In addition to this physical-labor regimen, George installed a system of self-governance within the camp: children served in the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches. These innovations were

intended to introduce children to the middle-class economic and political values that George imagined they were missing in New York's slums.

Eventually, Parsons's Fresh Air Fund also opened camps as a way to provide a country experience for a greater number of children. As the fund reached out to more diverse groups of young people—including blacks and the children of recent Jewish and Catholic immigrants—finding willing hosts among the mostly white, Protestant middle class sometimes proved difficult. Camps provided an opportunity for these children to be exposed to country life while avoiding conflicts with hosts over religious, ethnic, or racial differences.

Summer camps became more popular in the early 1900s as educators rejected the rote memorization that characterized



In a time when overcrowded, poor urban neighborhoods contributed to the spread of infectious disease, children's removal from the city to summer camps served as an opportunity for medical care in addition to fresh air. Here, a doctor examines young boys at Lake Stahahe camp. Courtesy of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission Archives.



A camp administrator inspects boys for neatness and posture c. 1923. Once children arrived at camp or at a host home, adults trained them to adhere to middle-class habits of cleanliness. Courtesy of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission Archives.

traditional learning and embraced the Progressive notion of learning by doing. In the first decade of the twentieth century, New York's leading social-service organizations—the Charity Organization Society, the Association for Improving Conditions of the Poor, and many of the city's settlement houses—all established their own camps. Lillian Wald, the leader of the Henry Street Settlement, framed the mission of these camps in the new scientific language of child development. “The possibility of giving direction at critical periods of character formation,” Wald explained, “particularly during adolescence, and of discovering clues to deep-lying causes of disturbance, makes country life a valuable extension of the organized work of the settlement.”

Middle-class concerns about public health served as a motivation for camps from the beginning: “fresh air” was a treatment for tuberculosis, which was rampant in tenement neighborhoods, as were cholera and polio. Camp administrators—and, in the case of the Fresh Air Fund, middle-class host families—wanted to improve tenement children's health outcomes, but

they were wary of possible transfer of disease from those children to camps and homes in the country. In order to guard against that, Fresh Air Fund representatives inspected children's homes, investigated their medical records, and required that each child undergo two physical examinations. Once the children arrived at camp or at hosts' homes, adults trained them to adhere to middle-class habits of cleanliness.

Early camps also aimed to introduce children to other conventions of the middle class. Fresh Air Fund camp counselors were disturbed, for example, by the food and drink that immigrant children consumed, such as coffee and organ meat. Instead, camp food included such classic American fare as jelly sandwiches, baked beans, beef stew, hot cocoa, and ginger snaps. “The offspring of the crowded city often utterly refuse to drink the milk, or eat the country delicacies,” one article on the Fresh

Air Fund camps reported. “A day or two, however, generally straightens things out.” Altering the children’s taste in food was part of a larger project of Americanization. A visitor to a Fresh Air Fund camp in New Hampshire reported, “I could not have believed it possible, had I not seen, that the ‘Melting Pot’ could have done such effective work in so short a time. There was no evidence of any distinction of class, race, financial condition, or anything else.” By bringing children from different ethnic backgrounds together into a middle-class environment, administrators hoped to integrate children into the dominant culture.

The Fresh Air Fund refused to serve kosher meals, thereby excluding observant Jews from their camps, but even camps aimed at a single ethnic group engaged in programs of assimilation. At Surprise Lake, the Educational Alliance—a settlement house on the Lower East Side—ran one of the few kosher camps for New York City children. Still, more Americanized Jews complained that children wearing hats to meals gave the camp “a distinctly oriental flavor.” In the 1920s an invited lecturer instructed children in how to speak properly and how to sit with a “correct American posture.” An article in the camp newspaper, also from the 1920s, demanded that campers abandon Yiddish and instead “speak the English language, the language of America.” Camp leaders hoped that children would return to their parents not only physically cleaner and healthier but also scrubbed of some of the ethnic peculiarities that might hold them back in American society.

The men and women who organized early sleepaway camps for poor children acted on a variety of charitable and political impulses: a desire to promote the health of kids growing up in overcrowded, dirty cities, to allow them to enjoy nature and leisure, and to encourage assimilation into the middle class. As camps evolved during the twentieth century, administrators shifted emphasis away from Americanization and public health and toward play and leisure. Summer camp made vacations in nature possible for generations of urban children throughout the twentieth century, especially in New York City, where many social-service providers continued to operate summer sleepaway camps. But in the late 1980s recession and fiscal austerity forced many organizations to close or sell camps. Between 1985 and 1996, the number of nonprofit sleepaway camps decreased from 435 to 321—more than 25 percent—according to an estimate by the New York State Camp Directors Association.

Despite a period of financial challenge and decline, there are still approximately 8,000 not-for-profit camps operating in the United States today, and the American Camping Association estimates that nearly one million children attend camp each

summer with scholarship assistance. In the summer of 2011, Homes for the Homeless sent nearly 600 children, most of them homeless New Yorkers, to summer camps upstate. Homes for the Homeless—like the Fresh Air Fund and the Coalition for the Homeless—operates its camps in order to provide opportunities for fun and learning in nature. Since they were built, in the 1930s, the camps that Homes for the Homeless now runs have been dedicated to providing outdoor experiences for underserved youth. Connie Stine, the director of one of these camps and the grandchild of settlement workers who opened the camp in the 1930s, explains, “I see camp as a way to continue my grandparents’ legacy on the site that they founded. The children we are serving are very similar to the children that these camps have always served. And it’s just as valuable today as it was 30 or 40 or 70 years ago for children to have the opportunity to be out of the city, to be in a new environment where they can learn about nature and the wider world around them.”

But contemporary camps are also interested in measuring specific benefits for those who attend, such as improved social and problem-solving skills. Lance Ozier, a member of the American Camp Association National Committee for Advancement of Research and Evaluation, argues, “At camp, kids learn things like responsibility, self esteem is increased, they take on leadership opportunities, they take on experiences that allow them to cooperate and work with peers and adults in meaningful ways that they wouldn’t have an opportunity to do otherwise.”

Private and government funders have increasingly looked to not-for-profit groups to measure camps’ impact on learning and school achievement. Recent camp models have aimed to combat the educational achievement gap by lessening summer learning loss among low-income students. In July 2012 New York City and the Fund for Public Schools launched Summer Quest, a day camp that merges summer school and sleepaway camp models, offering students formal, traditional academic programs alongside curriculum-aligned camping trips, sports, and arts activities. Ozier notes that camps are “more crucial now than in the early days because school has become hyper-focused on academic skills, and there isn’t space for these non-cognitive, psychosocial skills that you just can’t learn from grammar exercises.”

The psychological and social benefits that children accrue from camp are difficult to quantify. But as policymakers and camp administrators work to develop programs that reflect the evolving concerns of the social-services world, campers will continue to learn and play in a natural environment that they might not otherwise have encountered. ■