

Cold River Camp Memories  
Roger Damon, Jr.

First, a thumbnail sketch of this author. A male infant, being raised by a team consisting of his grandparents and his father's sister, all of whom were suffering under the lingering elements of the Victorian age . . . exacerbated by the mores of Mary Baker Eddy. The team had the wisdom to refrain from taking the infant to Cold River Camp until it no longer needed diapers.

It's my understanding that my first summer at Cold River Camp took place in 1932 when I was three years old. I'm told that first Sunday was a Baldface day, for which my grandfather was prepared. He'd cut leg holes in an old pack, carried me to the base of the ledges, and turned me loose. I was terrified when we came to a deep crack in the granite; it was too wide for me to step across and it appeared to go to the bowels of the earth. Buppa swung me across, and I guess I wasn't much of a problem after that.

My heroes were the leaders. I remember Larry with a long feather in his hat; the Dominie -- Rev. Wolcott Cutler -- who eventually taught my daughters "when we have a lovely day, we admire the things that are far away; when we have a rainy day, we can admire the things that are close." I recall a leader -- Dave -- and his motorcycle. Every Friday night, he'd head south on it and return the next afternoon with a girl -- each time a different young lady. After supper on Friday night, blistered and sore, she'd be back behind Dave on the motorcycle to be taken home. I've often wondered if he ever found one that met his expectations.

By now, it's apparent that we spent most, if not all, of a summer month at camp. My grandfather would sometimes return to Boston on Sunday night and reappear the following Friday evening. Porter cabin was our normal home, although I recall loving being able to sleep on the upper porch of Chalet, accessed by ladder. I must've been pretty much on my own, although I remember certain rules; on the porch, children should be seen and not heard; basin balls were not to be thrown; you will not cross the river alone; do not pester the crew. In the earlier days, the crew consisted of ladies living in the Valley. Being the only child in camp, I suppose I had more than enough supervision. Playmates were few and far between; Lincoln Pratt, a year or so older, where are you now? There was only one leader and one hike for the day; I was allowed to go on the regular hike if its objectives were modest. I recall asking to be carried near the top of the Black Angel trail on Carter Dome and having the request satisfied with water and chocolate instead.

The hiking trail through Evans Notch was being transformed into a road suitable for automobiles. This was a WPA project, and it involved heavy equipment. Equipment wasn't very "heavy" in 1934 -- 35, as it consisted of a bona fide steam shovel and a bulldozer. I'll never forget the day I was allowed to sit in the lap of the bulldozer operator -- I guess it was the equivalent of a D2 machine -- while he transformed the rubble of broken rock and gravel into a passable roadway. That experience certainly narrowed my choices of what to be when I grew up.

A favorite spot was the courthouse with its sandy beach, perhaps 100 yards on the right bank, below the dam. The name belies its appearance; it was merely solid wood stadium seats, perhaps a half dozen rows, with a small roofed area at the top. After-dark campfires, usually with marshmallows to roast, were a frequent event usually following a "sing" or a story telling time. Another adventure started at the turnstile in the barbed wire fence by West Cox, following the path down to an ancient brook bed, then up into Cathedral Woods and its old white pines. It was a great place to build little cabins from twigs and sticks. This pastime was picked up by my daughters, and subsequently by my granddaughters... They had far more imagination than I did.

A major change with my association with Camp came in the summer of 1944. I had been selected as a crew member, in spite of my tender age of 15. Previously, under the management of Phil and Evelyn Bridgess, the crew was made up of college undergraduates. World War II changed all that, as there were no young men available, Mr. Bridgess was a naval officer, and Mr. and Mrs. Milton MacGregor became the new management team -- and boys of high-school age became eligible for Crew duties. Another major change took place in the kitchen, where, for several years, the chef's position had belonged to Mr. King, a quite British gentleman whose day always started with a quart of cold ale. In the summer of 1944, Judy Gilman, Barbara Hodgkins and Dot Forrester took over bread-making and cooking. The next summer (1945) three young ladies from Simmons College -- Carroll Gay, Rita Popke and Helen Levey took over food preparation. Mr. MacGregor had been Hutmaster at the Lakes of the Clouds on Mount Washington, so large-scale cooking was not unknown to him. In 1945, the very first bread that came out of the oven was totally carbonized on the outside -- when broken open, the dough ran out. Mr. MacGregor had a long row to hoe, but by the time the first guests arrived, food was "okay". The waiters were neither party to his instructions to the girls, nor to the apologies that he must have had to make from time to time to hungry campers.

Mr. MacGregor made arrangements to pick up the new crew as they proceeded north from the greater Boston area in the 1939 Ford station wagon which had already seen many miles. I have no idea how many trips between greater Boston and North Chatham it had taken, but we were the last of the contingent -- two kitchen boys and six of us as waiters and other assorted duties -- cabin prep for new arrivals, water distribution, cleaning shower buildings, lawn care, daily porch sweeping, cleaning the diamond-paned windows of Conant Lodge, filling wood orders for cabins -- these tasks all come to mind. Some were more onerous than others. While the

evening ritual of taking garbage to the pigs at a farm north of Camp doesn't sound like fun, it was – because one of us got to drive the camp station wagon AND invite a young female guest to join us for a bit of quality time.

We'd been preceded by the three cooks, the hostess – Miriam Bond, and the MacGregors -- along with enough food to feed us a variety of menus so the girls could learn how to use a wood stove. It was the job of the kitchen boys to have the stove at operating temperature by 5:30 in the morning, while the waiters got the juices etc. on the tables which had been set up the previous evening. The crew had breakfast at seven o'clock.

Mrs. MacGregor took on the task of teaching six teenage boys the niceties of being waiters, which included how to wear our aprons so the strings didn't show. Also, how to remember who wanted what beverage without taking notes. This became a chore when waiters had days off and you had three tables. Mr. McGregor was a Scotsman and you didn't forget it. He wore a McGregor plaid tam when he was outdoors and the McGregor kilt for formal occasions -- primarily the Saturday evening square dance. We learned exactly what was under a Scotsman's kilt when he first directed the intricacies of the square dance from the balcony in the Rec Hall.

Who was the crew that first summer of 1944?

Kitchen boys: John D.C. Little, Richard (Dick or Boogie) Kimball, Channing Crisman (from Arizona), Charley French, Roger Damon, Bill Christianson and Bill (Bugs) Smyth. Chan brought his lariat but it didn't work in the East because it got - and stayed - damp. Pat was older than we were and was drafted into the army near the end of the season. The next summer, we learned that he'd been a KIA.

In 1945-6, Ted Barrett, Don Goss and Jack Wentworth were the kitchen boys. (Boogie had joined the hut crew at the Lakes. On his days off in mid-summer, he hiked all away from there to CRC in a day, just to play the piano. He hadn't lost his touch.) Waiters/Cabin boys included Ted Nixon, **Deighton (Deke) Emmons**, Bill Christianson, Randy Hare, Johnny Whitney and Bill's older brother who had returned from WWII and did maintenance work. We learned to leave him alone when he slept, as waking him up was dangerous. Sam Hawley, a 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division vet, also began what was to be a long association with CRC (and with the National Ski Patrol and this writer.)

A chap named Randy (Red) Hare was in one of these years, but his signature doesn't appear in the 1945 register. His family provided a notable event; when they arrived at camp in mid-summer, it was in a brand new Hudson – the first really new car we'd seen since 1941.

There were accidents, always at the worst possible time. After breakfast on Sunday morning, it was customary to have a reading from the Bible followed by a short silent prayer. The waiters traditionally were absent during this time. Of course, it was at this time that a waiter, whose initials are TPN, was in the pantry unloading three tables' worth of dirty dishes, trying to be quiet. His first move was to remove two articles from the tray at the far edge. The tray snapped to the vertical position, gravity took over and the load hit the floor exactly 2 seconds after the silent prayer had commenced. In the hush that followed, a number of Amens were heard.

Tennis court maintenance also fell to the waiters. It was usually done in the morning while the kitchen boys were peeling potatoes. I think a former kitchen boy will tell you that potatoes were served in some form or other every single day. Tennis court maintenance required the use of the water filled roller, along with straightening and re-stapling the linen line marking tapes as well as dealing with the encroachment of weeds. I think the court may have been a touch shorter than standard. It was a little hard to let a new guest win a game, as they double faulted a lot on serves. Mr. MacGregor was a very good tennis player, and he knew the court's hard and soft spots. Every now and then, a really good player would show up, and Mr. MacGregor would take him on. Those matches were something to watch.

The first Breakfast on Baldface might've been the summer of 1946. The entire camp participated, and it was accomplished slightly below the summit. Mr. McGregor did all the cooking, while the entire crew carried the food, utensils and firewood. The menu was oranges, hot oatmeal, pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon and tea or coffee. We were in place about an hour before the first guests arrived; Mr. McGregor's sense of timing allowed each guest to have his entrée placed in his hands as soon as he finished his hot cereal and juice. It was quite a performance. I heard him mutter something about "if they arrive more than six at time I'm done for." (Doris and I made sure to be at the Lakes of the Clouds on its 50th anniversary – which "Red Mac" attended. He was 70+ for that occasion – and Doris and I had to puff to stay with him on our way up to the summit.)

I think the busiest time in the kitchen was at breakfast. One didn't make one's own lunch; instead, you made checkmarks on a preprinted form which listed every available type of sandwich – meat, ham, cheese, egg salad, tomato and lettuce, peanut butter and jelly, and plain bread – along with the definition of sandwich which consisted of a one piece of bread, or two half slices, if you wanted to think of it that way. You wrote in the number of sandwiches in each category along with your selection of dried prunes, an apple, hardboiled egg, cookie, cheese or fruitcake. Every lunch had an orange at the bottom of the bag – just like your Christmas stocking. Then, as soon as every table had had a chance to fill out the form as it circulated, the list went to the kitchen, where each

column was totaled and the sandwich makers went to work, the bag markers wrote names on the bags, and the bags were stuffed. The whole process took about twenty minutes; then, the bags were set out on the central table in the Lodge. The lunch list also told the trip leader who was coming on the hike, so he had to be looking over the shoulders of the lunch-packers.

Hardboiled eggs were prepared every couple of days. So there wouldn't be surprises, the eggs were marked in pencil with an "H".

This leads to a story. A five-year-old girl, the only daughter of much older parents, pestered the crew continually, both at meals and while they were doing chores. On a scheduled hike one day, a crew member noticed that the father taught his daughter "the true mountaineer's way of cracking a hard-boiled egg." One wrapped it smartly on the top of one's head. Subsequently, a crew member, who shall forever remain nameless, cleverly inserted an egg into the young girl's lunch, as requested, making sure that the letter H appeared. However, that particular egg had never encountered boiling water. He ensured that the egg was well padded when packing her lunch bag. I don't think we have to describe the results to the reader, do we? The episode took place on the hot summit of Baldface, miles from running water . . . We all learned from this event the philosophy of "don't get mad, get even . . ."

By the time I had a family and was a leader for a week most summers, this process was still in place. I taught my girls to first spin a hardboiled egg on a flat surface – like a closed guidebook – if they wanted to crack their egg like a true mountaineer. But then, my girls didn't pester the crew.

My job was getting the mail every day. For me, it was a privilege to take Mr. MacGregor's three-speed English bicycle, sling the mailbag diagonally over my shoulder, and pedal up to the post office at the Charles farm in North Chatham. This job got me out of waiting on table at noon, but there was a time limit on getting it done. Mail for the guests had to be sorted on the big table in the Lodge by the time they came out for lunch. Because many guests had their newspapers forwarded to them -- mostly Wall Street journals and Boston Herald's -- the mailbag got to be pretty heavy, especially on Tuesdays when the Sunday editions arrived. Miss Bond put a big tuck in the carrying strap for me, using the camp sewing machine, so that made it a little easier to manage. This summer, I'll have to check to see if the "outgoing mail picked up at noon sharp" sign is still in place. That was when the horn blew for lunch, also my signal to head north on the bike.

Waiters were assigned to certain tasks, which we kept for the entire season. Chan and I were cabin boys. Bill kept the front porch picked up and swept (a perpetual challenge), started the fire in the big fireplace, and took care of the pump. Ted Nixon took care of the restrooms (there were no Greeley showers then) and others took care of lawns, barracks, and the tower. Of course, there was duplication to cover days off – which began after breakfast on the assigned day and resumed in time to prepare supper. Compared to today, when camp "changes" on Saturday, comings and goings were more random. In today's terminology, Miss Bond was chief of quality control, particularly with respect to cleanliness of cabins. We often suspected that she had a pocket full of dust bunnies, gravel, pine needles, and a used Kleenex or two – which she would point out to us after we had totally cleaned a cabin. I consider her as the inventor of the philosophy that there's always room for improvement.

I think Bill Christiansen had the most frustrating job. The pump, located at the spring in the ravine down below Springhaven cabin, was a Fairbanks-Morse "Z" diesel engine driving a Fairbanks Morse duplex water pump by a connecting flat belt. Water pressure came from a wooden tank built above a single bunk room, which, in turn was on top of the men's restroom. A rope from a float ran over a pulley and down to a block of red-painted wood with a white stripe. When the tank was totally full, the white stripe on the marker matched a white stripe on the cabin. It was time to turn off the pump. If not caught, water cascaded down the outside of the tank, down the bunkhouse wall and to the ground. Conversely, when the tank was empty the marker was almost at the pulley and it was time to start the pump. I guess low humidity was never a problem in the bunk room.

Mrs. MacGregor usually took a shower in midafternoon. Invariably, the tank ran dry when she was fully soaped up in the shower. In that condition, she would appear, plaintively calling "Billy, Milton, there's no water . . ." and the nearest crew member (most of us knew how to start the pump) would take off at a dead run, slipping/stumbling/falling down the rotting log steps to the pump house, put in the crank, hold the valves open with one hand, crank madly with the other, release the valves and it would fire away very reliably – unless it was out of kerosene. (Many years later, I was an engineer for Fairbanks-Morse. Having access to an unlimited supply of repair parts, I took the pump home with me one winter and totally rebuilt it with new valves, new cylinder liners, new springs, etc. I also acquired enough additional parts to keep it going until about 3000 A.D. I was a little miffed the next year to observe that somebody had decided "it was old, so got a new one." I found the box of repair parts in the tool shed a couple years ago, so I took them home and recycled them. Oh, well.)

I guess, for the first time, I'll reduce to writing the story of the bearskin. It hung on the east side of the fireplace. It might've been the summer of 1945 when there was a good size group of young adults of both genders. Their spark plug was a gal named Edith. Early one hot summer evening, they decided it would be fun to go Swimming in Emerald Pool After Dark. Edith, however, begged off from a headache, so at dusk they departed, leaving her behind. As soon as they disappeared from view, she got the crew together and

said, "You kids gotta help me to get this bearskin down so I can put it on. Get me some rope so I can tie it on my arms and legs to look like a bear, I'm gonna scare the beans outta that bunch, and no, you're not going to come watch." Off she went, the bearskin in a bundle under her arm.

Averaging out the seven or eight different stories, Edith went up near to where the Emerald Pool trail diverges at the junction of the Circle trail and got down beside a tree or rock, got the bearskin tied on and crouched, waiting until she heard the noisy troupe coming up toward the Circle trail. Then she heard somebody say "Look! There's a BEAR!" She heard running feet coming towards her: how could they have seen her already, she thought, so she peeked out and here they came – yelling and screaming. As soon as the last person passed, Edith jumped out of her hiding place to find she was being followed by a real bear. They must've reached Warp 9 in velocity; Edith could no longer lope on all fours, so she stood up and started running herself. The hindmost person looked over his shoulder and said yelled, "Now it's standing up and running!" Somewhere along the line, the real bear gave up but nobody noticed that. They reached the road in a bunch, realized it was Edith, and the charade was over. General hysteria reigned on route 113 and they returned to Camp and helped Edith restore the bearskin to its rightful position. Edith said, "My only thought was I hope it wasn't mating season." I think it might have been a first for both parties.

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