

Camp Tecumseh in the 1930's

**Lee Bird
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This narrative is intended to describe Camp Tecumseh and its meaning to the campers of the 1930's. I was a camper from 1932 to 1936, and a counselor from 1937 to 1940. While a camper, I was lucky enough to work for my summers by gardening, which was an important learning experience for me. Of course, like all other institutions, Camp Tecumseh has changed over the years. In the '30's, it clearly reflected the unique personality of Alex Grant, the Camp Director. He talked often at great length on rainy days; he led religious services every morning; and he was there directing all of the activities of Camp every day, from scheduling the day's activities to arranging the menus for the day's meals with Mrs. Johnson, the Camp cook.

At the religious services, we had a prayer that was memorable and often repeated. The key part, as I remember it, was, "God bless those we love at home and help us to fulfill their trust in us." From time to time, we sang a hymn that went like this – "I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home, Earth is a desert drear, Heaven is my home." Referring to this hymn once, he said, "We sing this hymn not because of the words, because living in this beautiful place with the Lake and the Three Sisters (the Ossipee range), we don't think Earth is a desert drear. We sing the hymn for the music."

On his rainy day talks, he would go on for an hour or so. He talked about Sir Wilfred Grenfell, who was a medical missionary to Labrador, a cold part of northern Canada. He slept under the snow; he endured all kinds of hardships and privations in giving medical care to the local inhabitants, but he loved it. He said he was never sick

until he got back to civilization. On the ship going home, he was said to have tied a rope to a bucket, thrown it over the side, and pulled up a bucket of ice-cold Labradorean water. And being stark naked on the deck, he lifted the bucket and poured it over himself, saying "Isn't it great to be alive!" Then Alex said, "And there you are!"

Alex Grant came from a very religious Scottish Presbyterian family in Canada. His father was a minister, and his older brother was both a minister and a missionary to China. His wife, a doctor, was a medical missionary. Alex came to the United States at about the turn of the century to attend the University of Pennsylvania, where he became a miler holding the US record. In the 1904 Olympic Games held in France, he was chosen to represent the US in the mile run. But the French officials scheduled this event on a Sunday, which posed the same question for him that the hero in "Chariots of Fire" faced. Like the latter, Alex refused to run on Sunday, so he participated in another event in which he was not successful. In matters of principle, he was inflexible.

He often talked about principles in which he believed. For him, there were three key sins. At the top of his list was tobacco use, or smoking. He was death on smoking. His second capital sin was the use of alcohol, and the third was gambling. He had stories to tell about all of these sins; persons who succumbed to them and others who had resisted temptation. He always illustrated his talks by telling at length the story of a person who could best exemplify the conduct of which he approved or disapproved. Talking about a certain person whom he admired, he said, "You couldn't pry a drink into him." He was a fascinating raconteur.

Alex was also sentimental. He was a widower with two grown daughters when I knew him. The pump house at the end of the garden nearest the lodge and trunk room had a wire fence around it. At the edge of the fence, he planted sweet peas each year so that they would grow on the fence as though it were a trellis. Once he explained to me why he did this. "Sweet peas were the favorite flower of my wife."

The Assistant Director of the Camp was Forest Gager. Since he had noticeably red hair, he was called the "Red Fox"; Alex Grant, who had white hair, was called the "Silver Fox," of course, behind their respective backs. Mr. Gager had a sign over his office door, "kwitcherbelliakin," i.e. "Quit Your Belly Aching." He took care of the finances of the Camp, paid the bills, and did all of the executive work of that sort. He made payment of the salaries, our wonderful salaries as counselors, usually \$50 for the summer. But because we received money, and because of the recently instituted social security program, we each had to have a social security number. In New Hampshire, there were a lot of zeros in the social security numbers that we got. Mine started out "003," which is somewhat reminiscent of James Bond who was famously known as "007," who had a license to kill. When I go into the Commissioner of Revenue's office on the local scene, the staff greets me with "Here's 003," and I respond, "Yes, and I have a license to pay taxes."

The head counselor of the Seniors was Al Wagner, a man of great geniality and very popular with the boys. He was genial enough all summer until toward the end when something in nature caused him to have hay fever. He literally dissolved. He had weeping eyes, a dripping nose and he was utterly miserable with the allergy that he suffered. There was a zany episode at one of our Sunday evening feeds, when

there were a few cinnamon buns left over. Al decided that he would raffle them off, and his technique was to ask the seniors to "pick a number between 1 and 50." He went around the group and everyone picked a number. But when he came to Drew P., who said "86," Al responded, "No, Drew, you have to pick a number between 1 and 50." "Oh," said Drew, "72." At that, there was laughter unquenchable among the seniors.

Ralph Johnson was the head counselor of the Intermediates. He, too, was genial and ran a very good show. He was known, among other things, for his performance as Sergeant Bouncer in *Cox and Box*, a short British musical which was played during the early days of each Camp season because it had only three characters, all of whom were played by counselors who knew their parts well. Toward the end of *Cox and Box*, there is one of the great recognition scenes of all time. Cox says to Box, "Do you have a strawberry mark on your right shoulder?" Box replies, "No!" And Cox, "Then it is he, my long lost brother!" They embrace and the play ends shortly thereafter.

Pinkey Shover was the head counselor among the Junior B's. One summer, he came up early as many of us did, to get the Camp ready. With six or seven campers and counselors, Pinkey was helping to carry one of the large war canoes from the lodge area down to the waterfront. This war canoe was perhaps 25' or 30' long, a very large craft. It required a number of people to carry it, and they carried it upside down so they could hold it aloft over their heads by the thwarts. Pinkey was somewhere in the middle. He was short, and when they came to a dip in the ground, his feet didn't touch the ground as he held onto his thwart. However, he kept his feet moving just as though he were walking on the ground, when, in fact, he was walking on air.

Every Saturday night, the Camp enjoyed an evening of drama at the lodge. Of course, the Gilbert and Sullivan show was the principal show of the year, coming late in the season to give participants a chance to rehearse properly. During the Camp season, Henry Williams, the drama director, would retire to one of the Camp's islands to compose a serial built on the structure of the *Perils of Pauline*.

One year, Alex Grant gave a long rainy-day talk on Teddy Roosevelt, who, during his campaign for the presidency, had appeared at a whistle stop, on which occasion Alex was in the crowd. He saw Teddy on the observation platform waiting to speak. Teddy had been a sickly boy, and his parents had sent him out West, to ride horses, live the strenuous life, and otherwise build himself up. Boy, did he build himself up! He regained his health, developed a magnificent chest, rode horses, and became a vigorous and energetic person. As he was standing on the observation platform waiting for his turn to speak, he played with a watch fob at his waist with his right hand and grinned so as to show all his upper teeth. Alex looked at him and said to himself, "I'm sure that if he looked down he couldn't see that fob, so gigantic was his chest. Ah! He was a beautiful man, physically."

Henry Williams picked up on that story in the final episode of that year's serial. George Stanley was the heroine and like all heroines of Tecumseh drama, he wore a dress that Henry had brought with him from the drama department at Dartmouth, where he taught drama. George, as heroine, was being assaulted by a particularly villainous villain, and he was in a most desperate plight. Bob McDonald, the best athlete among the seniors that year, was dressed to look like Teddy Roosevelt. He jumped down out of the hole in the lodge ceiling over the stage wearing a cowboy hat and a mustache,

grinning like Teddy Roosevelt and turning his face this way and that to show all of his upper teeth. He had a pistol at his belt and for a watch fob, he had a large round shaving mirror at his waist, which he manipulated with his right hand. To make it plain that he couldn't see the shaving mirror –cum – watch fob, Bob's already large chest was amplified by a pillow under his shirt so that he looked for all the world like a pouter pigeon. He stood there grinning, turning his face from side to side, and playing with the large watch fob. Finally, almost as an afterthought, Bob rescued the fair maiden and defeated the villainous villain. Alex Grant, who was in the front row, whooped with laughter. He was always able to laugh at himself.

Once I witnessed an interesting backstage encounter. Bob Eckles, who was large and somewhat rotund, was late in recognizing his cue to go on stage. He moved quickly to get on stage, as quickly as possible through the narrow apertures in the scenery, but he was temporarily barred by a very young Junior B, who was out of place and blocking his progress. In a perfectly enunciated stage whisper, Bob said to this little boy, "GET-OUT-OF-MY-WAY-YOU-GOD-DAMNED-SON-OF-A-BITCH." The terrified little boy vanished in an instant.

Another kind of event at the lodge was music. Alex had made an arrangement with the Juilliard School of Music in New York City to give young pianists who were studying there a free summer. All they had to do was play the piano, which they did as a matter of course for about seven hours a day. We had two virtuosos in the making, Willy Kapell and Gene List. In addition, we had music played by other more mature pianists, Bill Tongue, Walt Dabrowski and Bob Eckles. Willy Kapell was a showman. When he played a piece known to all campers as "the fire music," he would shake his

head, his long hair would fly all over the place, and he made a spectacle of it. The boys were always asking him to play "the fire music" as a result. Bob Eckles also could play the piano very well. He was often asked by Alex to play Chopin, which he did beautifully.

The counselors were chosen to supervise events within their respective expertise. They supervised those events, but also at the rest hour, they often read to the boys under their charge. I can remember reading *Mutiny on the Bounty* and *Men Against the Sea* to the boys in the Junior A pagoda. This pagoda was located on high ground overlooking the lake. At night, one could hear the loons offshore with their maniacal, quavering, laughing call.

Every several weeks or so Alex would have a meeting of the counselors to go over with them any problems that might have arisen and discuss matters of general interest. In reminiscing about my experience as a counselor at Camp Tecumseh under the leadership of Alex Grant, I now think what a wonderful preparation for fatherhood this experience was. We were expected to be role models, and we learned to relate to the young boys under our charge.

Looking back at Camp Tecumseh in the '30's, I realize how significant the impact of the Great Depression was on Camp life. In order to make it possible for the older boys to attend Camp, given the difficult economic circumstances of their parents, Alex provided jobs for them in lieu of the tuition fee. There were two teams of waiters who waited on alternate days. The waiters not only brought the food and beverages to the tables, they also cleaned up after each meal, washed and dried the dishes, and set the tables for the next meal.

There were gardeners who tended the extensive vegetable garden, planting succession crops of beans and lettuce, cultivating and weeding as necessary, picking the vegetables that were to be eaten each day, and often preparing them for the cook, Mrs. Johnson. From mid-July, the garden supplied almost all the vegetables for a Camp population of 120 hungry people. During the Camp season, younger boys who wanted to earn a little extra cash could pick beans or corn and receive their pittance with gratitude.

Other jobs performed by older campers included operation of the creamery, where raw milk was separated into skim milk and cream; care of the riding horses, which included riding instruction for boys who requested it; making ice cream each day, with the help of an ancient woodpecker engine that was not only temperamental, but also marvelously syncopated; and daily maintenance of the tennis courts.

In order to prepare for the arrival of the campers, a number of early birds would go up to Camp two or three weeks before opening day on the 5th of July. One of the jobs involved picking up cow flops from the grass around the lodge, where cattle had been allowed to graze during the winter. Another thing was to paint the boats and the canoes and get them ready for the season. Once, one of the early birds, Jack Havens, was asked to paint the bottom of the rowboats white. He painted the inside bottom of the boats white whereas they had always been brown. When asked why he had not followed instructions, he replied indignantly, "Well, a bottom has two sides."

In the long evenings after our early bird work was done for the day, Drew Pearsoll, who was a star pitcher and a nut about baseball, developed a sport known as backboard baseball. He would station himself in front of the backboard, which was

designed for tennis, and announce what was going to happen and who the batter was. He knew the rosters of all of the Big League teams, the batting orders, everything. Like the public address systems of that day, he would announce "Silence ple-azz," and would then say, "Jones batting for Fathergill." Next, he would make a sound like the roar of the crowd when an announcement is made. He would throw the ball up and hit it with the bat that he had in his hand. The ball was soft and would bounce against the backboard without damaging it. He would call a hit, a double or a strikeout, with appropriate crowd roars, to the edification of all of the other campers who were going about their respective business elsewhere. His performance was a marvelous one-person exhibition.

Camp Tecumseh had a context unfamiliar to most campers. The Camp extended over 500 acres, with considerable frontage on the lake and two offshore islands. But on its inland side, it was bounded by the road that ran down the middle of Moultonboro Neck. And along that road, the Camp had many year-round neighbors. In the evenings before Camp started, the early birds would gather in Alex's office to read, write letters, or chat.

There was a telephone in the office – a rather large wooden box, with a projecting speaker, a receiver on one side of the box attached to it by a wire and hanging on a hook, and a crank on the other side. One activated the phone by lifting the receiver off the hook and turning the crank a few times. When this was done, an operator would come on the line and ask for the number you were calling. It was a party line, with 12 parties served.

When the phone rang (not the Camp's ring), we would sometimes lift the receiver to listen in. We could hear other receivers up and down Moultonboro Neck being lifted also, by listeners who wanted to participate in the affairs of the community. "Visiting," they called it. The callers were mostly women who gossiped about going to Center Harbor, shopping, meeting friends, and so on. They had a hard life, like their men folk. The latter did hard, physical work, but in the company of one another. The women were isolated at home, and lonely, which accounted for their attempt to find companionship by "visiting" on their party-line phone. This was the unspoken context of Camp Tecumseh on Moultonboro Neck.

The programs that we had at Camp included organized sports, of course. Each day a schedule of events was displayed on the several bulletin boards about Camp. For each division – Seniors, Intermediates, etc. – a principal activity was scheduled, one for the morning, one for the afternoon. There was a good deal of flexibility in this, and lots of time for campers to pursue their own interests. Reflecting the Civil War, the campers were divided into two groups – the Blues and the Grays – for purposes of intramural competition.

Unorganized sports also flourished. Tennis, including instruction, was popular; there were three daily swimming periods; rowboats – St. Lawrence skiffs – and canoes were always available. Finally, there were the trips – mountain climbing, culminating each year with the ascent of Mt. Washington, and canoe trips around Long Island with exciting exposure to the Broads (the wide central section of Lake Winnepesaukee which often had large waves).

Some boys didn't participate in organized sports. There were two boys from Washington, DC who were sons of a doctor there. The doctor's specific instructions to Alex were that they were not to be required to participate in any organized sports. Alex accepted that condition, so the boys busied themselves with nature study, carpentry and other noncompetitive activities that the Camp offered.

We had nature study under the direction of Itchy Snyder, Princeton 1934. Itchy got his name from an event that happened before I was at Camp. He had bragged that he was immune to poison ivy, and to demonstrate his immunity, he rubbed poison ivy leaves all over his arms. The inevitable result produced his nickname and reputation as a nature guru. We had a drama program under the direction of Henry Williams. And we had carpentry under the leadership of Mr. Drexel, known as Drex, who was a gifted carpenter and woodworking instructor. He constructed a 16' sailboat in the Camp carpentry room. It was marvelous to watch as he put it together expertly. He also introduced the construction of bows and arrows. He got lemonwood staves for the bows and a special fir for the arrows. He also taught the use and maintenance of carpentry tools.

Another program, which Alex fostered, was to permit boys to build a hut on one of the islands. These were simply built huts, but some boys enjoyed doing this under the paternal guidance of Hayes Aikens, presumably in satisfaction of an atavistic urge. The organized sports included tennis tournaments, basketball, baseball and competitive swimming. The campers swam in the nude, except on Tecumseh Day when ladies might be present. Any boy among the younger ones who didn't know how to swim was taught how by a patient and helpful instructor.

The farm was an important element of the Camp. Alex's stated purpose in having a functioning farm was to make it possible for city boys to experience rural life and to enjoy the farm products that resulted. There was a dairy herd of 20 Ayrshire cows, and a bull to keep the cows fresh. There was a creamery, where the milk was separated into skim milk and cream. The boys drank skim milk at the table; the cream was there for them in the ice cream, which was served every day. The butter, which we enjoyed liberally during the summer, was made during the winter when there were no campers to drink the milk. The vegetable garden, which was supervised by senior campers who got their summer free, included a full range of vegetables including beets, beans, carrots, New Zealand spinach, tomatoes, and potatoes, plus several fields of sweet corn. And LETTUCE.

One of the principal vegetables in the garden was what Alex called "superfood," otherwise known as lettuce. We had Iceberg, Romaine and my favorite, Burpee's Wayahead, which we know now as Boston lettuce in the supermarkets. We had superfood three times a day all season, and we also had corn, when it came in in mid-August, three times a day until the end of Camp. The corn was Golden Bantam, which had a small ear with eight rows of kernels. The waiters, who were ravenous adolescents, could eat six ears at a time. To eat it efficiently, they cut it off the cob into a soup bowl, where, with a liberal application of butter, they had a wonderful dish that would take the edge off the most ardent hunger. Alex used to say you could see the corn plunging through the line in the ensuing football season.

The farm had three permanent employees, Clint Grace, the head farmer, George Hathaway, and Horace Fife. There were no tractors on the farm. There was a team of

horses, Tom and John, and a singleton named Dinah, an elderly horse who was a born actress.

We used Dinah in the vegetable garden to cultivate the soil after a rain in order to create a dry mulch that would conserve moisture in the ground. As preparation for assuming the job of gardener, Alex had required us to read a book called "Gardening With Brains." Gordon Yocum and I both read it with interest. Gordon was particularly amused by the book's admonition, "If you tickle the soil with a hoe, you will make it laugh with the crops." When we used Dinah for cultivation, we were in effect tickling the soil – and it really did laugh with the crops. Occasionally, when we had only a small job of cultivation to do, we used a machine known as Big Edna. Big Edna was fully as temperamental as Dinah, and not easy to start up. To get her started, we would frequently call on the technical expert among the campers, Charlie Hargens, who never failed to activate her for us.

During the course of going up and down the rows with the cultivator, Dinah would act more and more tired. She was elderly and she gave every appearance of being completely exhausted. When we finished the work toward noon, unhooked her from the cultivator, and headed her to the barn, she went at almost a gallop. We could hardly keep up with her. She knew that oats and other goodies were waiting for her up there.

The team was driven by George Hathaway, who knew horse language. Horse language is, according to Wendell Berry, to threaten ever-lasting damnation with invocations of the deity and any curse that is available in one's vocabulary, shouted in the most threatening and abusive tones. This was necessary to get the attention of

Tom and John, especially when they were backing the hay wagon into the barn for the removal of the hay. Horses don't back up easily. George was a fairly young man, but he had a somewhat stooped appearance. When he took off his shirt, one could see why. His back was all knotted muscle created by the exceedingly hard work of a New England farmer. Once, when he removed one of his shoes, I could see that he had a bad case of hammer toes.

Clint Grace, the head farmer, was also a carpenter. I can remember seeing him drive up to where the pump house now is, but wasn't then, with a truck full of lumber. In about two days, using only a hand saw and other hand tools, he had erected a pump house with walls, a roof, and a window; the whole bit. It was a remarkable task for which he had no written plans. The plans were all in his head. Notwithstanding his intensity in work, he would always pause, if you had a joke to tell him. You told your joke and he would listen appreciatively, and then he'd give you at least two back. That was country life for him.

Horace Fife usually wore a wool hat, and was never to be seen without a cigar in his mouth. He didn't have teeth, so he gummed the cigar without smoking it. When he pulled his hat off, the top of his head was absolutely white, whereas the bottom under the line of the hat was deep red and sunburned. I made a practice, whenever I saw him, of asking him for advice as to the weather. His response was invariable and very cautious. He would look up at the sky, take the hideous gummed cigar out of his mouth, and say, "Wayal, God damn it, it might rain," (thoughtful pause) "and then again, God damn it, it might not." His weather advice always held firm.

Horace was an expert in building a load of hay on a hay wagon that had no sides. We pitched forkfuls of hay to him as he stood on the wagon's platform, and he carefully placed each forkful on the sides and corners and then tied them into the forkfuls he placed in the center of the wagon. The load thus grew to a height of perhaps eight feet. Despite the rough ground over which the wagon had to pass, no load ever fell off.

The Camp's kitchen was presided over by Mrs. Johnson, a benevolent tyrant. She was a favorite of Alex, who often chatted with her and got her view of life in general, of the kitchen in particular. He met with her every day to go over the arrangements of the daily menu – what vegetables we would have and so on. She would get up and be on the job at about 5 a.m., and she would work until about 8 p.m. To manage such a long workday, she would say, "Ah works easy."

She had an assistant named Willy, who was the husband of her daughter, Florine. Florine mostly worked in the laundry. Every so often Mrs. Johnson would be provoked by Willy and she would say, "Willy, you am so damn dumb!" Willy's response was to roll his eyes skyward, so that you could see nothing but the white of his eyes against his black face, as he disappeared to do whatever it was he had left undone.

Mrs. Johnson did all the baking; she made the bread, and on Sunday she made cinnamon buns for the Camp. She had a bakery oven, which consisted of about ten shelves, with the fire at the bottom. She always used birch wood for the baking she said, because it produced the most steady heat. She moved the trays carrying the breads or cinnamon buns from one level to the other with precision. She was a wonderful cook. She told me once how to beat eggs with a fork. You break the eggs

into a bowl, and, with a fork held in your right hand, you move the fork through the eggs toward you, then lift the fork and move it away from you so that air can get into the eggs, then repeat the process rapidly until you have a uniform mixture. Getting the air in is the secret. With this knowledge, I've always used a fork rather than an expensive mechanical beater to prepare scrambled eggs.

In late August, the early morning temperatures were often low enough to produce hoar frost, and some of the counselors would go into the kitchen to stand by or near the large wood stove and warm themselves. Quite naturally, this annoyed Mrs. J. who was busily preparing breakfast. A certain counselor once became a little testy with her when she appeared to object to his presence in the kitchen. He was a teacher with a limited salary and a wife and four children to support. To avoid having more children, therefore, he had had a vasectomy, and somehow this fact, known by many counselors, had also become known to Mrs. J. When the counselor continued to fuss with her, she said, in no uncertain terms, "Get out of my kitchen, you half man!" Again, laughter unquenchable. He left, sputtering with rage.

In the morning, we gardeners had to get up early to cut the lettuce for the day, before it wilted under the heat of the sun. We would cut the lettuce, ice it, and take it into the walk-in refrigerator. When we had finished, Mrs. Johnson would offer us some of her tea. She had it cooking on the back of the stove, until it was quite black and would just barely pour. If you had that tea with milk, you had a concoction that would line your stomach with something equivalent to leather.

Another occupation relating to the kitchen was the icing of the two walk-in refrigerators, the one on the right for the meats, and the one on the left for the fruits

and vegetables. The icehouse was behind the kitchen. The ice was cut from the lake by Clint and his compatriots in the winter and brought to the icehouse. There, it was covered with sawdust for insulation so that it would survive with substantially no melting all during the summer. We would go into the ice house, get a large cake of perhaps 100 pounds with tongs, and take it to the entrance to the icehouse, where it would be dipped in water to get the sawdust off and hosed, if necessary. It was then put on a runway which ran along the side of the icehouse and turned at a right angle to the left and went in the two refrigerators, which Clint Grace had constructed. In the refrigerators a large vigorous senior like Bob McDonald would stack the ice, which would cool the refrigerator for approximately one week, after which the process had to be repeated.

In assembling these reminiscences, I have been overcome with gratitude for the extraordinary vision that Alex Grant had in founding Camp Tecumseh, establishing it in such a beautiful part of the world, and endowing it with such graceful and benevolent guiding principles. We campers are all his beneficiaries.

Lee Bird

Lee Bird
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