

Sunday Night at Camp

By Brian Wick

In 1976, when I was 7 years old, there was no better place on earth than Baker's Acres. I simply called it Camp. Late on Friday nights, my brother and I would take that long drive down to Camp with our father in his '71 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. Groggily climbing out of the car, you could feel that cool sand underfoot. We'd whisper in pain stumbling around in the darkness, stepping on all manner of stone and wood. Night after night we would try to hold flashlights steady, and hear the clanging of giant metal tubes that constructed the frame of our heavy canvas tent.

On some nights, lying there on my cot in a sleeping bag, I'd hear rustles outside or the whispers of passers-by. I could see strange, wicked shadows made by their flashlights and by the headlights of others who were arriving. Other nights it rained. Instructed to not touch the canvas sides, the impulse was too irresistible. Inevitable and eventually, water made its way down the sides like sweat and formed small pools on the floor.

The mornings were glorious. Up around sunrise or so, I remember the scent of fresh air filtered through huckleberry bushes and dry pin-oak leaves. And the distinct aroma of our propane-fired Coleman stove. That little metal stove would clink and clank and rattle as Dad pumped the miniature red fuel tank. I couldn't wait to eat. Watching the blue flames and hearing its low hiss, I'd stand close enough to feel its heat. Dad cooked pancakes and Taylor ham.

Sometimes I'd run down the sandy lane to my grandfather's site. Along the way, there were occasional blue stones that hurt the tender foot. There were also small piles of clam shells, still hinged and containing the bits of muscle inside from individual seafood feasts up and down the campground. At my grandfather's site, I could hear the low hiss of his stove inside his screen-house. He'd stack giant piles of pancakes and fried eggs and saturate the dense meal with pancake syrup. We ate together and enjoyed our time talking about family and Muhammad Ali and Evil Knievel and fishing and crabbing.

While we ate and talked, people all around would begin to stir, and Camp would slowly come to life. Screen doors cracked shut, plates would clink; voices got louder. Grandfather would send me on my way with a kid's coffee—lots of milk with a splash of hot brew from the pot. I'd strut past the other kids with my cup and make sure they knew I was allowed to drink coffee.

Some days we'd venture off to the island and later boating took up large parts of the day, but back at camp we'd explore, hide, collect, ride bikes, meet other kids and be free. It was liberating to know that we were sort of supervised—the entire collection of adults knew we were there, but no one followed us around or watched over our shoulders.

Huck Finn would've loved this place. This was my Mississippi River, complete with hideouts, fictional bad guys, and general adventure. And it had a cast of characters.

Some had names like "Poopah", who was a tinkerer and built homemade windmills from beer cans. He sometimes wore an umbrella hat when it rained, and made sure everyone knew it was called a *Brock-a-brella*. He was a regular, you'd seem him fireside on Saturday nights laughing and telling funny stories with the adults. He kicked the evening off with "Wine Time" late in the afternoon. There were people who would decorate their sites with minimal lighting and not much gear.

There were people who would clear as much foliage away from their site as the Bakers would allow, and rake and sweep and plant and water and fence and AstroTurf to absurdity. There were people who were the envy of Camp with giant, clean, shiny, climate-controlled trailers. There were people who participated in the events that the Bakers planned—small concerts in the apartment above the pool, covered dishes at the pavilion, costume contests. I once saw a woman dressed in a bikini and reel-to-reel tapes at the tail end of the Nixon administration.

There was Jack Baker, a skinny, bushy-haired young adult who seemed to be everywhere at once. He always wore jeans, never wore shorts and always had something funny and quick to say when you saw him. And there was “Red” Baker, who we lost and will never forget. The news ripped through Camp like the fire that took him from us. Even as a kid, I never thought Camp would survive. But it did, and it grew.

And every day we had fun, and every night we had fun; except Sunday night. Sunday afternoon had the night-before-school feeling that the end was nearing. And Sunday night held that wretched hour that marked the end of the fun. As gloomy and dark as Sunday night was, Saturday nights were for celebration. And the party started at the groan of a tractor.

The hayride was a homing machine. It called us away from the dinner table. The tractor’s low moan signaled the end of many meals whether food was finished or not. Legions of kids quickly triangulated the quickest path to the tractor and its hay-wagon. You’d run and run to catch up. Everyone on the wagon would watch and yell out and you’d keep running. The wagon would drop strands of hay, taunting you. You could see the step, hay hanging from its sides. Almost out of breath, full of semi-digested dinner, panting, Jack would have mercy and let up on the gas.

Once you boarded, the dry, coarse hay was in the air the entire time. Jack never told the kids to stop throwing hay. Hay was everywhere. It landed on the sandy trails, it landed in your hair; it was stuffed down the back of your shirt. Jack was always the driver, and we watched as he narrowly missed the skinny oak trees that were spared by inches each evening.

There were many meals shared at our site, many visitors and many friends who stopped by. There were many surprise visits from family. We had countless campfires, which some are the best memories that I have. We talked about fishing, boating, crabbing, LBI, and the possibility of a home on the water.

Sunday night at Camp has come. It will be missed dearly. The far-off dream of living on the water is now a reality. It’s bittersweet, and I will always fondly remember the people and the time that I spent at Baker’s Acres.