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Summer camp glues the blues

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Summer camps across the country are being mothballed this week, now that campers have returned home and are becoming scholars again.

Sleepover camps introduced me to kids I would not have otherwise known and activities I would not have otherwise done, many of which are best left unrecorded.

I learned to sail in 1959 at Admiral Farragut Academy in Toms River, N.J., where my parents sent me to “get some discipline.” My first lesson in this field came on my maiden voyage as a passenger in a five-person, wooden catboat. The captain -- a fellow 13-year-old who we came to call, “Weasel” -- muttered the theretofore-meaningless phrase “Coming about” a second before the sail’s boom smashed me square in the forehead. That I didn’t kill him proved that I was acquiring discipline faster than anyone expected.

In addition to teaching me to keep my head down, naval camp instructed me in how to march, shout at others and pretend to do what I was told.

During rest hour, time was spent developing humiliation rituals for others, many of which had to do with shaving cream, toothpaste and underpants. An older camper showed me how to give blackout “highs” to my friends by cutting off oxygen to their brains. Weasel kept turning down my offers to “do” him.

This was a lot more sophisticated crowd than what I was used to. One kid financed his canteen account by stealing cash from his friends.

My roommate became a successful Washington lawyer. Another who struggled with many shortcomings now runs a major metal manufacturer, which his father and grandfather ran before him.

Camps from this era were general practitioners that offered a bit of everything conventional—softball, swimming, archery, tennis, riding, boating, riflery, crafts, nature, overloaded septic systems.

Today’s camps orient themselves around one activity, such as SAT preparation, horseback-riding injuries, painful bites from endangered species or social networking without a phone, which might even include the dreaded face-to-face oral interface. Even the most specialized camp continues to offer a handful of the traditional, generic activities like meals and infirmary.

Before acquiring discipline at Farragut, I spent a couple of summers at coed Camp Wood Echo, near Ligonier, Pa. There, I learned to cut hospital corners, fold socks, short-sheet counselors, kill wasps that nested in the rafters above my bed, play mumblety-peg barefoot, scratch poison ivy scabs and position a broom on the top of a screen door so that when it was opened inward, the broom fell on the head of an unsuspecting entrant. The years since have built on these skills.

Wood Echo opened my eyes to the great literary works of western civilization through Classics Illustrated—comic books whose pages could be turned even faster than Cliff’s Notes.

I earned four National Rifle Association marksmanship patches at Wood Echo. I wore them proudly on the back of a red windbreaker until someone in greater need of self-esteem stole it from a junior-high cloak room.

Coed camps worked better for me. Wood Echo was less raunchy than all-male Farragut. For Saturday night “socials,” I prepared by patting my white bucks with a bag of chalk dust and anointing my hair with some vehicular gunk that made it stand up straight in front like a hood ornament.

Camp romances among 10-year-olds were announced by giving the girl a hand-plaited plastic

lanyard bracelet, called "scoubidou." The highest- ranking counselors hung their Stop-whatever-you're-doing! whistles from lanyard necklaces. The edicts of kings struck less fear than the screech that must be obeyed from those fifty-cent metal whistles.

Both Wood Echo and the New Jersey wing of Farragut Academy are gone...as are the lanyard bracelets that encircled my hopes.

Most farm kids stay home during the summer, because they're expected to make themselves useful. Teens in Iowa, for example, get to detassel corn in the field to produce a higher-yielding, hybrid crop.

Teens around Blue Grass get to work hay wagons, move cattle and text each other as they contemplate novel forms of hybridization. Next week they are rewarded with our four-day county fair that provides an opportunity for them to be swindled out of their earnings by shooting at moving targets with rifles whose sights have been cunningly misaligned. I'm hopeful that the NRA awards me a patch for targeting commerce of this sort.

Teenagers losing money at a county fair is a rite of passage just like making a lanyard and learning to duck a boom swinging in your direction.

I do think, however, that more of us should be shouting, "Coming about!"

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