

A Salute to the Woodcraft Camps

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“We found the perfect location in our back yard!”

Bertram B. Culver
1963

In preparation for the opening of his new academy in September of 1894, Henry Harrison Culver set out 40 acres of his lakefront property for what became the Culver Military Academy in the fall of 1895. Anxious to have a good enrollment he decided to tap the lake communities’ young population in July and August of 1894 and charged his new headmaster, J.H. McKenzie, with operating a summer camp. McKenzie employed a well-known cornetist named Albert Nealy and recruited a small band from among the 16 students who were enrolled.

In its July 20 issue, a reporter for the Marmont *Herald* noted that “while promenading through the Culver Park Assembly Grounds, he heard the sweet and soul thrilling strains of music as it floated through the air.” Nealy was entertaining with one of the first-ever summer concerts on the campus.

To Mr. Culver’s disappointment, none of Reverend McKenzie’s 16 boys enrolled in the Academy. Worse still from the founder’s perspective,

McKenzie had little appetite for a camping program and refused to recruit campers for the 1895 summer. Further errors in judgment, including the observation that no-one in the outside world knew the name “Culver” and the suggestion that the school be called St. Paul ’s, brought the two men to dagger-point and their relationship was concluded after a single year. Not until 1902 was there further effort to operate a summer camping program on Lake Maxinkuckee .

Not surprisingly, it was Commandant Major Leigh Gignilliat who approached the trustees with the suggestion that it open a summer camp based on a nautical format. He had played a major part in the creation of the Black Horse Troop and was fast-directing the reputation of the school as a premier military academy. Most certainly he was aware of the Culver family’s feeling about a summer program and anxious to further establish his bona fides, proposed the operation of a summer naval school in 1902.



He even had the perfect man to direct an eight week session – his brother Thomas – an 1883 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. Edwin and Bertram Culver gave their blessing and Lt. Commander Thomas Gignilliat was appointed to head of the Culver Summer Naval School . To the Culvers regret and Leigh’s embarrassment, Tom proved a poor recruiter and only 20 boys enrolled for the 1902 session. Disappointed with his brother’s lack of success, Leigh Gignilliat took command the following year and enrollment began to soar. Tom, without rancor, became the director of seamanship, a post he held until 1910.

The Black Horse Troop, already a staple in the military school, played no part in the summer operation of the Academy until 1907. After the Final Formation each June, the mounts were turned out to pasture and spent the summer grazing – and unexercised. Disturbed by a degraded herd of horses when school resumed each September, the dynamic director of horsemanship, Robert Rossow, persuaded Gignilliat to open the Culver Summer School of Cavalry. It began operation just two months prior to Culver’s grand adventure to the Jamestown Exposition in



1907. Its success cemented it as a major part in the burgeoning summer camp program.

The Woodcraft School

In his monograph saluting the Woodcraft Camp's 75th anniversary, Major Dick Zimmerman noted that the success of the Naval and Cavalry schools was so impressive that parents asked the trustees if they would not bend on the age requirements and let younger boys attend. Gignilliat and Rossow heard their requests but determined that handling 28-foot cutters and managing cavalry training would be too strenuous for boys under 14. However, the die was cast. Gignilliat saw a "beautiful lake, unlimited opportunities for the study of trees, flowers, birds, fish, and all outdoor things" and on this basis the School of Woodcraft evolved.

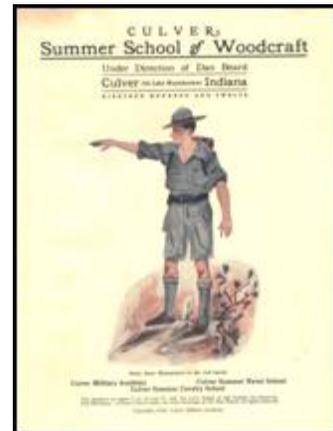


In 1912, Gignilliat, now the superintendent, committed his efforts to yet another summer camp, this one based on the international Boy Scout movement as exemplified by its leader, the dynamic Sir Robert Baden Powell in England . The founder of the World Scout Movement and Chief Scout of the World, while never visiting Culver, suggested that certain elements of the scouting movement be incorporated into Culver's newest camp and his name brought instant creditability to the new program.

Operationally, Gignilliat employed Dan Beard, already recognized as the director of the



Boy Scouts of America, to be "officer in immediate charge" and the new camp was off



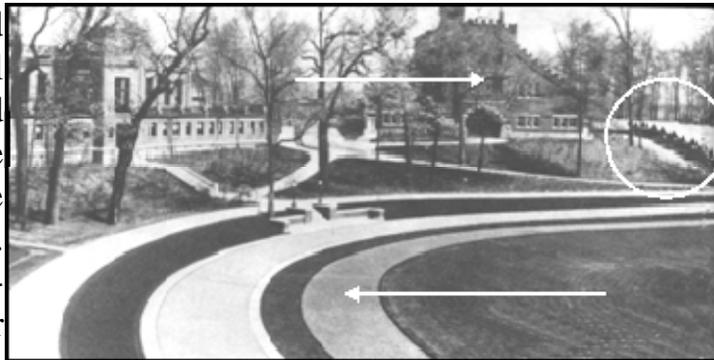
and running. Between 1912 and

1915, Beard (below left) planted the seeds of a burgeoning scouting movement. In 1916, author and explorer Dillon Wallace was named camp director and a year later he tapped a personal friendship with renowned naturalist Ernest Thompson Seaton, a leader in the Woodcraft League, to lecture the campers. He appeared annually until 1931 and did much to inculcate the mystique of nature in the minds of young boys.

Dick Zimmerman, the Woodcraft Camp's conscience and storyteller since 1951 pays homage to Seaton's ability "to teach the secrets of the wild, impart the wisdom of the Indian, preside at the Council Ring, and inspire campers to see the wonders and beauties of the forest and field."

The first Woodcraft

Camp (circle) was located just east of the Riding Hall (top arrow) and the broad expanse of land between the camp and the lake became Culver's first athletic field. It was defined by a quarter-mile running track (lower arrow) and hence became known as the Oval. The Cavalry Camp that had occupied the site since 1907



was shifted across the street and aligned north of the infirmary.



The Woodcraft Camp flourished under Beard and Wallace's direction and by 1923 had seen a tenfold increase in enrollment – to 331 from 36. Meals were in the new Mess Hall between 1912 and 1915 but a year later the campers

moved into a large Mess Tent located about where the Naval Building now stands. Not until 1930, when the relocation of Indiana 10 provided the room to expand the main camp, was the canvas Mess Tent abandoned. For the

next 33 years the Woodcrafters marched into the main Dining Hall for their meals.

For a number of years Academy officials had petitioned the state highway department to move Indiana 10 several hundred yards to the north and eliminate the existing east-west road (red) through the heart of the campus. It disrupted school activities, was a threat to the students and campers, and blocked northward expansion of the Woodcraft Camp. In 1929, the state relented. When the road (yellow) was opened late in the year, the Academy immediately began to install cabins and ancillary buildings on the newly opened property. When the camping season opened in 1930, a major expansion of Woodcraft Camp had taken place. By 1940, the area was filled with wood-framed tents, a log cabin museum, canvas-covered offices, latrines and showers. Success also brought more campers, and camp officials began to decry their inability to expand. In 1951 the new Memorial Chapel (orange, right) limited expansion since it encroached into the Woodcraft Camp. Faced with a status quo on further growth, the trustees began to examine possible sites for another camp.



The Sites

For the next 12 years the program prospered, but it was obvious that expansion was a major issue. The board of trustees, particularly Bertram B. (Bud) Culver, the chairman, and his cousin, Edwin, began to examine alternative sites. Chapel architect, Fred Larson from his office in New York City, suggested a lakefront camp east of the Naval Building and envisioned an Indian encampment complete with live-in tepees. While it had a visual

appeal, the ground level, just slightly higher than the lake itself, was totally unsuitable and was rejected out-of-hand.

Larson, after designing the Naval Building , the Memorial Chapel, and Beason Hall, ended his association with the Academy in 1951 and all architectural responsibilities passed to William B. Ittner in St. Louis . Ittner was enamored with the wooded 15 acres west of the Culver Inn overlooking the lake. Though visually impressive, the so-called Indian Trail bluff was rejected because there was little room to expand and access to the lake was difficult.

Having lost this battle, Ittner tried again. He drew up a full set of plans for a site north of Indiana 10 in the general area of today's baseball and soccer fields. Newly installed Superintendent Major General Delmar T. Spivey embraced the new design and urged the Board to authorize final drawings and move the project forward.

Bud and Ed Culver were less sanguine about the site. They recalled in their institutional memory that an earlier road had blocked expansion of the Woodcraft Camp and saw such a move as creating even more issues. If a highway through the campus created traffic and safety issues in 1929, the multiplier effect would be horrendous 30 years later. Woodcrafters would have to cross the highway to reach the main campus, the Chapel, the Mess Hall, and the Recreation Building ! Worse still, they would have a long distance to travel to reach the waterfront.

The Culvers also questioned Ittner's evaluation of the site. It was little more than a flat field with little contour, few trees, and nothing to inspire a vision of what they thought a Woodcraft Camp should be. Spivey saw the folly of staying with a losing position and deserted Ittner forthwith. The Culvers turned to Lester Heckle, an architect in Ittner's firm, for whom they enjoyed confidence and the project was transferred to him.

The four men began a tour of Academy property in the spring of 1960. They commandeered a jeep from the Military Science Department and began to cover the hills and dales. Almost in complete surprise, Bud recounts that: "We found the perfect location in our backyard!"

East of Indiana 117 (Lake Shore Drive) and diagonally across from Henry Harrison Culver's first residence, the "Farmhouse," was a sweeping parcel of land containing two wonderful stands of trees, a sweeping

meadow, and much hilly terrain. It was protected to the south by holes one and two of the Academy Golf Course and to the west by 117. Indiana 10, long the bugaboo for the campers, was well to the north of the projected site, and at the easternmost extreme was the Academy airfield. There was ample room for expansion. Indeed, it was *almost* perfect.

The most obvious problem was the distance from the main campus; too far to use the Mess Hall. The other concern was for lake activities west of Indiana 117 and, therefore, a safety issue for campers who would have to cross the road. The latter was quickly solved when a tunnel was constructed under the highway near the boat sheds. Feeding the campers posed a greater logistical problem. The new camp required a large on-site dining facility. Rather than attempt construction of a second kitchen, food was prepared in the main Dining Hall and transported in portable food warmers to the Woodcraft Camp.



In their conception of the new facility, Bertram and Edwin rejected the canvas-and-screen cabins of the old camp (left). Though they had provided well for countless campers for five decades, they were labor intensive and had to be assembled and disassembled each year. Lester Heckle was given a mandate to design permanent structures that would stand the test of time. Heckle

was in seventh heaven as he working on a new creation.

Having taken heart from the successful campaign to raise funds for the Chapel (1951) and the three buildings of the Gignilliat Quadrangle (1956-57), the administration began a campaign to raise the estimated \$1 million dollars required to complete the Woodcraft project. Among those contacted was Ralph Smith, a lumber magnate from Kansas City . He became the major enabler when he pledged \$250,000.

A prototype cabin was constructed at the main entrance to the old Woodcraft Camp. It was completely furnished and became a showpiece to demonstrate its features to campers and visitors during the



1962 season. In February of 1963, the six-ton cabin was towed east on Indiana 10 and onto the grounds of the new camp.

The trustees approved the construction of 60 cabins, a dining hall, a headquarters building, a library, and a museum. They also placed their blessing on Heckle's recommendation for materials and design – vertical cedar boards from floor-to-window level, translucent plastic windows which swung out for ventilation and to allow breezes to enter, and what became the camp's trademark, a steeply pitched roof sheathed in thick cedar shakes.



Ground was broken during the summer of 1962 by Woodcraft Regimental Commander David Breech CMA '66 (left) while Superintendent Spivey and Director of the Summer Schools Admiral Bays supervised.

Throughout one of Culver's worst winters in memory, heavy equipment leveled cabin sites, hauled in gravel, poured concrete foundations, contoured the hills into walking paths and covered them with tons of tan bark (most of which washed out in the first big summer rain – but not before turning counselors' and campers' shoes, socks, and feet a deep shade of crimson). But they struggled to meet the most important deadline: Opening Day. As spring arrived, the big enemy became mud. Tractors and trucks rutted the landscaped and Spivey joined with the trustees in insisting that damage be held to a minimum and schedules be kept.



For campers and counselors who had been part of the original Woodcraft Camp it was a bittersweet transition from the old to the new. Young camper Albert Paré CMA '67 wrote in the *Vedette* that alumni “watched with a saddened heart” as the camp was demolished. He noted, prophetically that some of these same

alumni “may warm with enthusiasm this winter at Football Bonfires using the same wood.”

As June drew closer, everyone heaved a sigh of relief when it appeared goals would be met and the Woodcraft Camp would be ready for the 648 boys who were registered. In May, Spivey announced that the new facility would be dedicated on July 26-27 during the Summer School reunion weekend.

Camp officials went into overdrive to ensure the weekend went without a hitch. Colonel M.A. Estey, the Woodcraft Camp director, anticipating a sizeable crowd for the event, forwarded a memo to all parents requesting that they not disrupt the traffic flow by blocking driveways and that they use the designated parking areas. Alas, the architects planned only a single driveway into the camp and ignored the need for an egress road. A huge traffic jam resulted and tempers flared as parents headed for dinner in town, the Culver Inn, or at the Three Sisters.



It was a wonderfully clear weekend as dignitaries and parents gathered for the official opening. The first promotion order announced that Steve Miller and Ron Rubin (rear row) and Ken Blaine and Bill Brennan (front row) had marched off with top honors.

The ever-proud Color Guard composed of J.E. and T.C. Everhard and Randy Smith and David Hoesel presented the National and Culver Flags with great pride, and the Drum and Bugle Corps, directed by Major K.E. Kurtz, prepared for another stellar presentation at the Garrison Parade. Not lost in the festivities was the presentation of “The Death of White Dog,” directed by a Culver legend, “Chief” Myers, the director of Indian Lore, at the Saturday night Council Fire.



The site for the new camp was perfect. The open meadow in front of the Dining Hall and Headquarters Building surveyed a lovely vista to the west. The cabins, clustered in the woods on either side of the meadow, were shaded and provided comfortable venues for over six hundred boys. There was no shortage of land for expansion and facilities for a museum, hobby and craft shops, and an extensive Boy Scout camping area, were easily accommodated to the east. Safety concerns were satisfied by the tunnel

under Indiana 117 that made the lake and its waterfront activities readily accessible to the campers.



As the Woodcraft Camp completes its 42nd year it's hard to understand how such a magnificent site escaped the Culver family for so many years. "Bud" Culver was right, "*the perfect location was in our back yard!*"