

Jim Hoe



The Chronicle Quarterly

Weston Historical Society

Summer 1995

Volume 14, No. 2

SUMMER CAMPS IN WESTON

There were several summer camps for children here in Weston in the early 1920's and 1930's.

The first camp was established by Gertrude Jelliffe Perry in 1916.

She bought 10 acres of farmland on a plateau, above and on the east side of Newtown Tpke about 1 1/4 miles north of Godfrey Rd. Mrs. Perry's summer home was in Fairfield and the campground was used just by her family. Sometimes there would be as many as 20 people in tents. There was one permanent rustic building for storage.

In a recent edition of the Chronicle we told you about a second camp located on Newtown Tpke. This was the "Tohnc Boys Camp" which later became "Singing Oaks Day Camp" which operated until 1987 when the property was sold for private development.

A third camp was located south of "Singing Oaks" on Ladder Hill. It was a boys camp named "Camp Saugatuck." In April,

1926, Mary Taliaferro of New York City purchased the original Fitch farm (53 acres) from William Robinson. In 1930 Ms. Taliaferro sold the camp to her husband George P. Weddle. The Weddles built the dam and dredged out the lake. The camp boys played baseball and other games on the big field which is now a lake. Creating the lake destroyed a section of Ladder Hill Rd. which is why there are North & South sections. Mt. Weddle leased the camp to the Weston Field Club in May of 1948 and later sold it to them. The camp remains today for children of members of the Club.

In the early 1930's the Y.M.C.A. had a boys camp on the river near Valley Forge. The grounds were leased or borrowed from Bridgeport Hydraulic Company but the camp had to close when the reservoir dam was completed. The Girl Scouts of America opened "Aspetuck Camp" in 1939 along the Aspetuck River.

John & Helen Wessels came to Weston from New York City in 1921. They purchased the Elizabeth Mead Farm located at 159 Georgetown Rd. The Wessels loved the land and wanted to share it with city

people who could not afford the mountain and beach resorts. In 1924 John and his sons Albert, George & William, built three of 20 cabins. They advertised in the "Bronx Home News" and the camp became a great success. Fathers would leave their families at the camp and join them on weekends. John (or Pop) Wessels would drive the housewives into Georgetown once a week to shop at Conners', the A&P and Bonsignore's.

Pop built a spring-fed swimming pool whose water always tested pure. He also constructed a community recreation building for parties, games, special affairs and dances every Saturday night. Many romances between city and country folks sprang up, resulting in eight weddings. The camp had to close in W.W.II with gas rationing and other problems. Some of the cabins being outmoded were torn down and others were fixed up into year-round homes that are still lived in today.

(ed. note: This is a condensed reprint of an article written by Arthur James Hoe for The Weston Forum several years ago. With the advent of summer we thought it was well worth repeating.)



In 1954 Peter Thawertins bought Talbot Camp and converted it to "The Singing Oaks Day Camp" for both boys and girls. In 1968 Peter and Rex Merban bought the property and continued to run the camp facility until 1987 when the property was sold for private development



In 1920s Wallace Greene Arnold of New York bought a number of parcels of land between Newtown Turnpike and Godfrey Road East and combined the more than 100 acres into campgrounds where he owned Talbot Boys Camp.

Window On Weston: Summer Camps

By Arthur James Hoe

Weston used to be a factory town with many mills and shops on all the rivers. When steam power replaced the water wheel and the mills and shops closed down, Weston became a summer vacation town. A town of farms, but also a town of camps and summer homes.

The first camp was established by Gertrude Jelliffe Perry in 1916. She bought ten acres of farmland from Charles Morehouse, on the plateau, above and on the east side of Newtown Turnpike, about 1 1/4 miles north of Godfrey Road. Mrs. Perry's summer home was in Fairfield and the campground was used just for camping for her family and friends. Sometimes there would be more than 20 campers there, all living in tents. There was one permanent rustic building for storage and other uses. I do not believe that the campground was in use after World War II, but the sign, "Perry's Camp" remained on the driveway until the property was sold by Gertrude Perry's daughter in October 1959.

During the years when this camp was in existence, Weston had a very different appearance than it has today. Like most farmland, it was all open fields, with trees along the stone walls and on the hilltops. These farms were very busy before World War II. The big farms hired a lot of migratory workers for farm labor in the summertime. The Morehouse family owned my house on Newtown Turnpike and the farmland that used to go with it (now Blue Spruce Circle), and used the house as a dormitory for the farm workers. The Coley family used the old mill building on Goodhill and River Roads for a dormitory for their summer help.

In 1922, Wallace Greene Arnold of New York bought 40 acres of land between Newtown Turnpike and Godfrey Road East, from Mr. Herbert Sengerle of Tuckahoe, N. Y. In 1924, Wallace Arnold bought the adjoining farm on Newtown Turnpike from Charles and Eva Barnes. He then opened the "Toltec Boys Camp." From time to time, he bought several other parcels of land until the campgrounds covered over 100 acres. The last parcel was one acre, purchased in 1936 from Mrs. Eva Barnes. The old farm buildings were converted to camp use, and many rustic camp buildings were



In 1954 Peter Travostino bought Toltec Camp and converted it to "The Singing Oaks Day Camp for both boys and girls. In 1968 Peter and Ree Meehan bought the property and continued to run the camp facility until last year when they sold the property to developer Stephen Rappaport.

added: cabins, shelters, a large meeting-house with bell tower and large fireplace and a beautiful gymnasium. Mr. Arnold was respected and well liked by everyone. He only hired local Weston people to work at the camp, which was kept open all through the Depression and the war. One of the workers was Mrs. Eva Barnes, who was the camp cook for many years. The former Barnes horse and carriage barn was down on the Newtown Turnpike roadside, opposite the Devil's Den School House. (Perhaps, this barn was on the one acre that Mrs. Barnes kept until 1936.)

In 1929, the Horace Hurlbutt Central School was built and Weston needed school buses. Three citizens bought school buses and rented their services to the town. One was Mrs. Eva Barnes; she kept her bus in that horse barn until about 1950 when the town bought larger buses and kept them at the school. When Mrs. Barnes decided to stop driving, two of her children drove the bus, first Harry and then Eilene. The second bus was driven by David S. Coley, who lived on River Road. Besides driving the children to and from school, Mr. Coley used his bus for a commuter service to the railroad station. (Later this bus was taken over by Homer Zimmerli of Goodhill Road.) The third bus was a high school bus, which took the students down to Staples High School in Westport. It was owned and driven by Linn Corsa who lived on Georgetown Road oppo-

site Cannondale Road. He probably kept the bus in the old barn which is still there.

Singing Oaks

In 1952, Wallace Arnold leased "Toltec Camp" to Peter Travostino, who, two years later, bought the camp. Mr. Travostino converted "Toltec" to "The Singing Oaks Day Camp" for both boys and girls. Since 1968 "Singing Oaks" has been owned by Peter and Ree Meehan. It has been a wonderful camp, catering to one thousand children each summer in recent years. The facilities included arts and crafts, nature study, dance, singing, computer literacy, track, tennis, riding, riflery, archery, theatre, baseball, volleyball, soccer, boating, (two ponds) and swimming in both pond and heated pool. There is a lovely white sand beach on one pond. The old Toltec Gymnasium was equipped with a trampoline and other equipment for gymnastics. Unfortunately, 1987 was the last season for this fine camp, as the property has been sold for private development.

Camp Saugatuck

A half mile south of "Singing Oaks Day Camp" on Ladder Hill Road, which parallels Newtown Turnpike, was another boys' summer camp, "Camp Saugatuck." The property used to be the old Fitch Farm. In April of 1926, Mary E. Taliaferro of New York City, bought the 53 acre property from William H. Robinson. Four years later, in 1930, Ms. Taliaferro sold the camp to her husband, George P. Weddle. I don't know when the camp opened; it may have been started by William Robinson. George and Mary Weddle built the dam and dredged out the lake. The camp boys played baseball and other games on the big field which is now a lake. Creating the lake destroyed a section of Ladder Hill Road, which is why we now have north and south sections. George Weddle leased the camp to The Weston Field Club, Inc. in May of 1948 and later sold it to them. I helped remove the built-in bunks from one of the cabins. Mr. Weddle added some rooms and made a summer home for himself. It has now grown into a handsome year-round residence. The Field Club has maintained a day camp for members' children. The "Camp Saugatuck" pony barns

Aspetuck Camp

In the early 1930's, The Y.M.C.A. had a boys' camp on the Saugatuck River near Valley Forge. The camp grounds were leased or borrowed from the Bridgeport Hydraulic Company. They, of course, had to close the camp when the reservoir dam was completed. In 1939, the Girl Scouts of America opened "Aspetuck Camp" in Weston on the Aspetuck River. The original camp consisted of 10 acres and accommodated 120 girls per session. They recently acquired 6 more acres for possible expansion.

Besides the children's camps, there were two "family camps" in Weston. One of them, "Stony Brook," was established in 1932. It included a community-owned center with tennis courts, swimming pool and other recreational facilities. Surrounding the center are privately owned lots. Originally, there were 42 summer homes there. Today there are about 50 homes, half of them year-round dwellings and half of them summer homes. Like "The Weston Field Club," they have maintained a day camp for community children. "Stony Brook" was an early and successful model for all the retirement communities now being constructed all over the country.

Elizabeth Mead Farm

In 1921, John and Helen Wessels came to Weston from New York City and bought the old Elizabeth Mead farm at 159 Georgetown Road. (The 200 year old farmhouse was once the home of "Daisy" of the song, "A Bicycle Built for Two.") The Wessels loved the beautiful farmland and

Helen kept thinking of the poorer working people in the city who could not afford the expensive mountain and beach resort hotels so popular in those days. In 1924, John Wessels and his sons, Albert, George and William, (aged 7, the "go-for") built the first three of 20 cabins. They advertised the cabins in the "Bronx Home News." The camp became a great success. The city people were delighted to be able to spend the summer in beautiful Weston at a price they could afford. Working fathers would leave their families at the camp all summer, or as long as they could afford, and drive up from the city on weekends to spend the time with their families. The camp was known as "Wessels' Camp" and John was called Pop Wessels. He used to drive the housewives into Georgetown once a week to market at Connery's, the old A & P and Bonsignore's. Pop Wessels built a fine spring-fed swimming pool whose water always tested pure. He also constructed a community recreation building for parties, games, special affairs and dances every Saturday night. There were many summer romances between city girls and country boys, resulting in eight weddings. There weren't any movie theatres nearer than Westport and Norwalk, but campers and Weston residents could enjoy the big monthly square dances at the Coley barn and the fine outdoor classic concerts close by at Music Hill on Godfrey Road under the able direction of Conductor Nikolai Sokoloff. These were formal dress occasions, but they could be enjoyed by anybody sitting on the hillside under the stars. "Wessel's Camp" was a very happy place. When World War II came along, with gas-rationing and other problems, the camp had to be closed. By then, 1942, the cabins were becoming outmoded and several were eventually torn down. Those that remained were turned into year-round homes and are still being live in today.

With busy truck garden farmers and gentlemen farmers and wealthy vacation home-owners, such as John Orr Young, John Held, Jr., Alice de la Mar and Supreme Court Justice John Harlan, many people found Weston to be a delightful place to live during the early and Depression years of this century. Low population figures during the early decades led people to believe that Weston was a dead or dying town, no stores, (except their old post office), no factories, no movie houses. They weren't needed. Weston was very much alive.



In 1920s Wallace Greene Arnold of New York bought a number of parcels of land between Newtown Turnpike and Godfrey Road.

