

For the Young People of Kansas: Camp Wood

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The morning's soft light is chasing the deep blue remnants of night away. A determined breeze whisks through the tall grass hills. Raccoon and deer tracks are stamped in ground washed smooth and packed by the overnight rain. The placid lake mirrors the day's awakening and the excited slap of a beaver's tail on the lake waters is heard.

Portions of the morning scene described could fit the first moments of a day in many parts of Kansas. All of it was witnessed in just a portion of a morning at Camp Wood.

The camp, which is comprised of 385 acres in the Flint Hills of east central Kansas, is fondly remembered by some, never heard of by others. Some have been acquainted with the camp all of their lives, perhaps attending a camp as youngsters. Some have become associated with it only in the past couple years, long after their adolescent camping days. Most would agree it is a unique camp.

According to the camp's history, it all began around 1915 with a search conducted by the Kansas Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to find a permanent site in the state's tall grass prairie for a YMCA camp. After visiting other proposed sites in Chase County and some near Peabody and Marion, the state board decided on an area just south of Elmdale in Chase County. Stephen M. Wood, a YMCA field secretary and local resident, offered the donation of 40 acres for the campsite. The offer was accepted and camp was established in the words of Wood, ". . . for the young people of Kansas." Because of Wood's interest in youth and his help in establishing the camp, the facility carried his name. Over the next six decades the camp would serve as host to an estimated 100,000 campers attending 4-H camps (in the pre-Rock Springs Ranch days), YMCA gatherings, church camps, and numerous Hi-Y camps.

Management of Camp Wood periodically changed as the YMCA reorganized its structure of administration over the next 60 years, resulting in the camp being under the jurisdiction of a single YMCA branch rather than supported on a statewide basis. By the late 70's, the camp was a financial burden to its managing YMCA. However, under the terms of the original gift Camp Wood had to be operated as a YMCA camp or the donated acres would revert to the descendants of Wood. When other branches declined to assume responsibility for the facility, it was decided in the spring of 1980 to terminate the camp's operation.

Former associates with the camp were disheartened by the prospects. "It (Camp Wood) meant too much to too many people to let it go down the drain," recalled Don Coldsmith, a family physician practicing in Emporia and who spent parts of nine camping seasons at Camp Wood. Coldsmith's response echoed the memories and attitudes of others. So in July 1980, a group of former employees, campers and members of the Wood family chartered a new organization-the Camp Wood YMCA. It would seek statewide support, and claim as a primary purpose the operation and expansion of Camp Wood. The camp, operating under this new charter, opened in August of that same year. The first campers to use the facility were members attending an annual family reunion-descendants of Stephen M. Wood.

According to Luke Austenfeld, executive director of Camp Wood, the camp has a unique camping philosophy. "The YMCA started what is known as residential camping. . .which provides for Christian values to be taught and lived out in the outdoors. Camp Wood is the only YMCA residential camp in

Kansas. The camp provides opportunity for all boys and girls, regardless of their background, to participate in a community camping environment," he said. The "community camping environment" includes canoeing, float trips, horseback riding, daily chapel where Christian ethics are taught, and other activities. "It's open to all kids, from all backgrounds and it's always been that," he said. He cited as a unique example, a weekend planned for inner city adolescents from Kansas City, MO whose exposure to a country setting was practically non-existent. The event was initiated by a nationwide contest co-sponsored by Cappers Weekly and Kraft, Inc. called "Food and Fun Picnic Fantasy." Mary Ann Kohls, a Chase County resident, won the contest and called on Camp Wood to help as host for part of the weekend, aimed at allowing the adolescents to experience country activities such as fishing, canoeing, horseback riding, and a wiener roast around the campfire.

Austenfeld said efforts have been made to integrate the YMCA residential camping philosophy into current camp offerings, such as a wrestling camp and a computer camp. "The response by campers has been very good," he said. Camp Wood plans on offering these camps again in the summer of '84 along with the regular season's schedule.

While there could be many reasons to attend a session at Camp Wood, the one most often cited by former campers is the beauty of the area. "I've often said the Flint Hills are what God made on the eighth day after He made everything else-for His enjoyment and relaxation," Coldsmith said. Campers can have opportunity to experience that beauty through trail rides that meander through the surrounding Flint Hills, canoe or swim in the 10-acre lake located on the camp grounds, or hike through wooded lowlands or to the crest of tall grass prairie hilltops. "I remember sitting in a fox hole in the Philippines during World War II, dreaming of Camp Wood while others dreamt of home," Coldsmith recalled.

Because beauty is often in the midst of a rustic setting, major improvements planned by the Camp Wood YMCA board are geared more towards preservation of the natural setting than human convenience. "Camp Wood is not a Holiday Inn," said Pauline Ferrell, board member since 1980 and one who has had some association with the camp all her life. "It is an outdoor camp. There comes a point after which you lose the balance (between the natural setting and manmade improvements.) There need to be places where people can be outside and have time of reflection and retreat-places where you can go and see nature."

Besides the natural beauty, interest in the camp as a facility also seems to be growing. During the 1982 camping season, attendance doubled the numbers attending in 1981. And while the 1983 summer statistics showed fewer totals than 1982, 55 percent of the campers were those who had attended a previous session at Camp Wood.

One longstanding utilizer of the camp has been the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas. According to LaDonna Wind, assistant to the Bishop for Christian Formation, the diocese began reserving time for summer camps at Camp Wood in the late 1930's and has continually used the camp since that time with the exception of two summers.

"I absolutely love it (the camp)," Wind said. "The area offers some of the best of what Kansas has to offer-wide open skies. . . and the most beautiful sunrises and sunsets. I also love it (attending camps there) because of what I've seen happen in the lives of campers and the people on staff as they become more in touch with their faith."

So, for whatever reason one might conclude Camp Wood as unique-its history, how it's governed and operated, the programs and camp sessions, or its location, the camp has a lot to offer and plans to continue "for the young people of Kansas."

Camp Wood is a member of the Mid America Region and National Council YMCA. Membership to the Camp Wood YMCA is a contributing one to support the operation and development of Camp Wood. Membership is open to any person who would like to join and those donating \$10 or more are voting members of the association. An 18-member board of directors, elected by the members, directs the operation of the YMCA.