Camp To-Come-To A Popular Summer Option

WEST HAVEN (July 15, 2015) - Attending summer camp is a memory many hold dear even into their later years. In West Haven, the West Haven Community House’s “Camp To-Come-to” was the place where many West Haven children created these memories.

The Community House was founded in 1941 and one of the agency’s earliest programs was sponsoring a summer camp for youth ages 6- to 11-years-old, with its first session held on Monday, July 3, 1944 in the back lot, then vacant, of the agency’s complex at 227 Elm Street.

In all, 45 youth attended the nine weeks of camp, five days a week, with “member” families charged 75 cents; $1 for non-members. In those days, a significant part of the agency’s budget came from agency annual memberships.

In that first year and for many years to come, Indian themes were popular, and a large wigwam was constructed for activities at Elm Street. The 5- and 6-year-old campers were dubbed “papoose,” the 7- and 8-year-olds as “braves,” and the older 9- through 11-year-old campers the “chiefs.” Arts and crafts, games and story-telling were the featured activities in that first year.

Youth campers in 1944 would today be in their late 70s and early 80s, born in the years 1933 through 1939.

The Community House’s summer camp would continue for decades in various forms and at many locations. By the early 1950s, the summer day camp was held at Painter Park and featured music, games, athletics, storytelling, dramatics and stunts. For many of those years, the Playridge Cottage on Merwin Avenue in nearby Woodmont also served as a Community House summer camp site, with access to the Woodmont beaches being a prime feature, as well as swimming lessons offered at our own West Haven beaches.

Summer camp themes through the 1950s included Fun With Acting, a Harmonica Club, puppet making and a bird house building contest sponsored by the West Haven Garden Club.

By 1954, Camp Cedarcrest in Orange was added as a summer camp site, primarily serving Allingtown area youth in those first years, with West Shore youth attending the Painter Park program.

Among the memorable activities was the “Hill Billy Band” at Cedarcrest, which was led by a camper dressed as “Davy Crockett” and playing a horn. There was also an entertaining “Junior Band” that was formed. Campers also had much fun with the annual “Paper Hat” creation contests, and an animal care and feeding “Nature Museum” at Cedarcrest where raccoons, turtles, rabbits, snakes and pigeons were cared for by campers.
In 1956, summer campers at Painter Park raised $15 for the New Haven Register Fresh Air Fund, earning a picture in the newspaper. This marked the start of a long-term relationship with the Fresh Air Fund as a source of funding enabling many needy West Haven families to send their kids to summer camp.

When it rained, campers often were relocated for the day to the Community House facility at 227 Elm St. where much fun was had in the game room as well as activities in the wood-working shop.

Summer camp in 1958 featured “Gold Rush Town” created at Cedarcrest where campers dressed like pioneers and searched for gold. There was also a Swimming Carnival that summer. Most summers also featured a popular scavenger hunt, and in 1959 the Community House sponsored a “Summer Camp Reunion” that was well attended.

By 1960, summer camp fees were raised to $17, and by 1962 the decision was made to have all 3rd grade and younger campers attend at Painter Park, with all older campers regardless of location attending summer camp at Cedarcrest, which made staffing programming more cost effective.

In 1962, summer camp had grown to 359 total youth attending, and that same year a “Name the Camp” contest was held. Local resident, July Iverson, recently recalled that her contest entry – Camp To-Come-To – was the winner.

Swimming including lessons remained a major feature at camp on the West Haven and Woodmont beaches, and at Cedarcrest. However, the use of Cedarcrest was restricted to overnight camping only in 1967 and the summer camp day portion was held at a variety of locations in addition to Painter Park in the late ’60s and into the 1970s, including busing West Haven youth to the 110-acre “Old Settlers” Boy Scout property in Milford, a Boys Club (Camp Clearview) in Wallingford, the YMCA’s Camp Hubinger in East Haven and a 40-acres camp site in Durham.

In 1970, summer camp activities included Christmas in July, a Pirate Day, carnival and Western Day. That year, the Fresh Air Fund sponsored 95 city youth, and for the first time the Community House sponsored a two-week summer camp for children with disabilities.

Troubled boys from Boys Village in Milford also attended the Community House summer camp starting in the 1960s, as did out-of-town youth from the Children’s Center.

For many years afterward, the Community House’s “Camp To-Come-To” summer camp remained a favorite destination during the months of July and August for thousands of West Haven youth.

If you have a summer camp memory or picture that you would like to share as part of the agency’s 75th anniversary celebration next year, please contact Kathy Hart-Jones at (203) 934-5221, ext. 131, or by email at: khartjones@whcommunityhouse.net.