

Camp Daniel Boone, YMCA Camp on the Kentucky River

By Jeff McDanald, October 2007

If you could build the perfect summer camp, how would you do it? You might start with a remote location in wild and rugged terrain suitable for hiking and exploring. For swimming, rowing and fishing, you'd need the gently rolling Kentucky River. Some majestic limestone palisades to flank the river would be a nice scenic touch.

You'd add a wide expanse of flat bottomland for tents, tennis courts, volleyball, baseball, and a lodge. To take the drudgery out of bringing in supplies, you could add an on-site rail depot. And since you could do whatever you want, you might as well make it a kind of historic hallowed ground where the likes of Daniel Boone once trod.

Camp Daniel Boone was that wish-list summer camp. For hundreds of children that grew up in the Bluegrass area during the last century it's a cherished memory of a favorite summer.

The YMCA of Kentucky began operating Camp Daniel Boone in Jessamine County in 1911. As early as 1890 the camp had been run as a private enterprise. The camp was named for explorer Daniel Boone who had claimed over 1000 acres of the environs. In 1784 he built a cabin nearby which is noted on Filson's famous map of Kentucky.

You find the camp by traveling down Union Mill (169) toward the Valley View Ferry. Just before the ferry, turn right and follow Camp Daniel Boone Road about two miles to the end. Today the camp is abandoned, just some overgrown fields along the river. Floods and time have erased most of the remnants except for a few piles of lumber that mark where buildings stood. The last year that the YMCA ran the camp was 1978.

PIGS STARED US DOWN

Mildred Routt of Nicholasville attended Camp Daniel Boone as a teen in 1929 and 1930. A typical stay at the camp was two weeks.

"My favorite activities were the tennis and the swimming," Routt said. "There was a roped off area in the river for swimming. If we passed the swim test, we could jump off an old barge that was there."

"I remember taking my junior lifesaving test. You had to be able to remove your clothes in the water as part of the test. They kept some old oversized clothes and shoes there to use for the test."

Routt also recalls a time that her counselor led a small group on a hike into the hills for an open air camp out. "When we woke up in the morning the pigs from the neighboring farm were staring us down," she said.

She thinks today's youth might be missing out on something important. "It gave you a sense of responsibility," she said. "You learn good wholesome things and have good wholesome fun like singing and bonfires.

A 1936 Camp Daniel Boone Brochure described the daily program: "The daily schedule of activities, starting with the morning dip before breakfast and continuing thru the evening devotions and taps, is filled with helpful activities designed to promote the development of a healthy body, a keen mind, and a Christ-like spirit. Ample facilities are available for tennis, volley ball, base ball ping pong, quoits, hiking, nature study, swimming, boating and other out-door activities."

WHERE'S THE PLAYSTATION?

Executive Director of Kentucky YMCA Michael Haynes laments the demise of YMCA summer camp tradition.

"It's a hard sell today. Back then, they were really roughing it," Haynes said. "Society has changed and people aren't looking for that kind of experience anymore. A kid today is doesn't like to get too far from his Internet connection, Playstation, cell phone, and all of the other electronics. For the overnight camps that the YMCA sponsors now, we collect car keys at the door, so the kids won't drive off at night."

"More than anything though, regulation has put an end to the traditional YMCA Camp," Haynes said. "There are so many liability issues involved. Also it's expensive to maintain the camps, manage the staff, and the property."

Haynes points out that the YMCA is continuing to reach that same group today through school-based youth camps and other innovative programs.

THE GREAT COMMONER

Camp Daniel Boone might not have had its many successful years of shaping the lives of young men and women if not for a generous gift from one of the most formidable forces in American democracy, William Jennings Bryan. After three unsuccessful bids for the presidency, "The Great Commoner," as he was known, launched a speaking tour of the United States. He toured extensively in Kentucky in 1911, delivering well-attended lectures in Bowling Green, Russellville, Georgetown, Lexington, Berea, Winchester, Richmond, Versailles, Paris, Frankfort and Henderson.

Bryan was known for his deep, commanding voice, and he advocated his Presbyterian faith, prohibition, and world peace. He also spoke on behalf of the Young Men's Christian Association, having been a member of the organization for a great many years.

The 1911 YMCA "Kentucky's Young Men" Newsletter reported that Bryan "takes great pride in the gold case for his membership card, presented him by the membership

committee of the Lincoln, Nebraska YMCA on the 21st anniversary of his continuous membership.”

Bryan generously donated over \$1000. of the proceeds generated from his Kentucky speaking engagements to the YMCA of Kentucky “of which the entire amount was set aside in a special fund for the equipment of Camp Daniel Boone.”

BRIDGE TO THE PAST

Robert Harvey, now living in Kingsport, Tennessee, remembers seeing the railroad bridge over the Kentucky River during summer stays at Camp Daniel Boone in 1940 and 1941. The Riney-B Line that ran through Jessamine County had ceased operations in 1936.

However, when he returned in 1942 the bridge was gone, having fallen victim to the national effort to reclaim steel for the war. Today the piers are still intact and visible during a ferry crossing.

Harvey was instrumental in establishing an online web log for people to share their Camp Daniel Boone memories. You can visit the site at www.campdanielboone.wordpress.com

Note: Camp Daniel Boone is on privately owned property and is not open to the public.