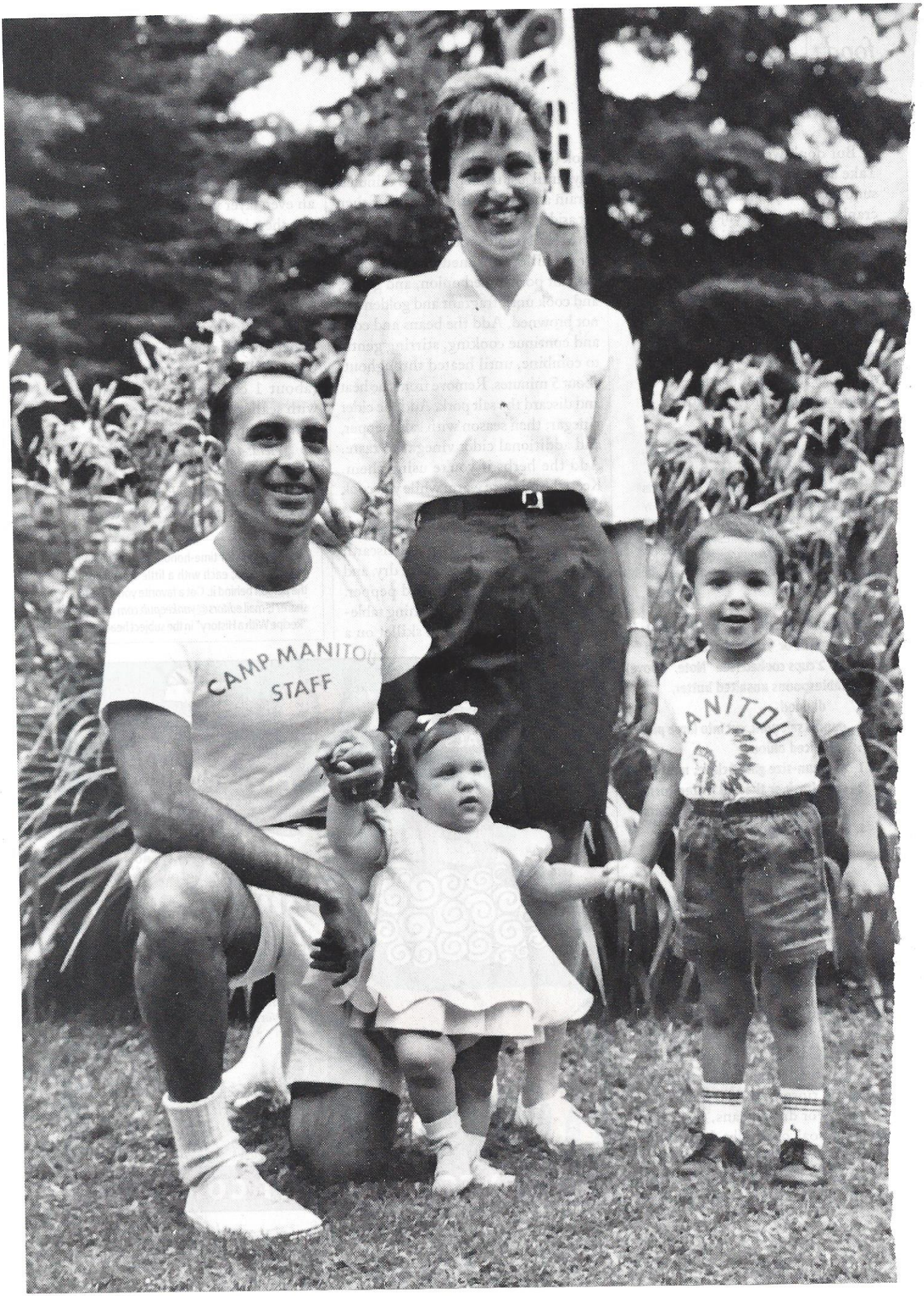
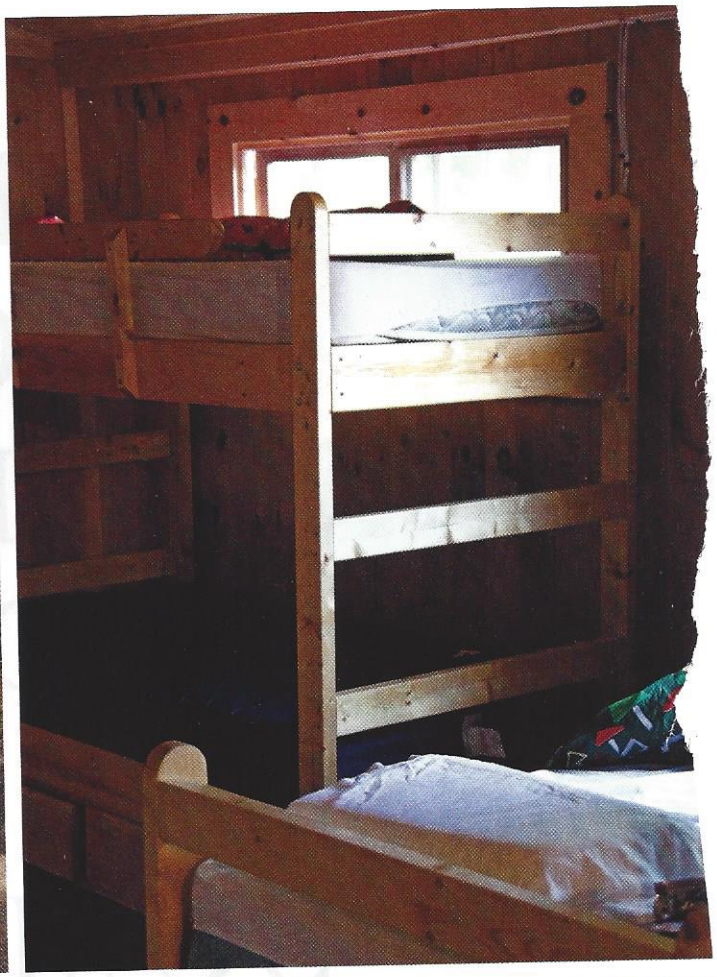

CAMP MANITOU
STAFF
ANITOU

THE BOY WHO DIDN'T LIKE SUMMER CAMP

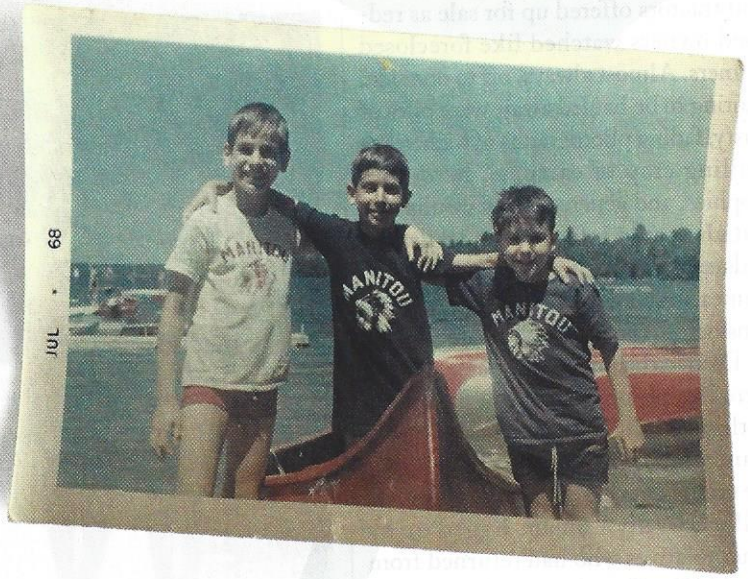
While thousands of youngsters cherished their memories of a boys' camp along a Maine lake, the owners' son couldn't wait to get away. Then years later he came back.

BY JON MARCUS

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHS
BY STEPHEN SHEFFIELD



OLD-LINE SUMMER CAMPS WERE, AND STILL ARE, ORGANIZED



ABOVE: **Manitou campers Rob Schlackman, Jeff Shapiro, and author Jon Marcus on East Pond in Oakland, Maine (the Belgrade Lakes area), 1968.**

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: **A cabin at Camp Manitou today; bunk beds; the dining hall's walls are decorated with camp memorabilia.**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: **Jon with parents Myles and Sue Marcus and baby sister Julie, 1964.**

VERY EARLY EVERY SUMMER MORNING, the tinny timbre of an amplified bugle slices through the fresh air of the New England woods along the shores of countless crystal lakes. Before the final notes can fade away, they're swallowed up by disembodied voices rousing sleepy campers with impossible enthusiasm over scratchy public-address systems.

"Another beautiful morning!" the voices exclaim, even if it's cold and raining. Then they launch into a rundown of what's coming up that day with such excitement and anticipation that it takes real strength of will to roll over for a few more minutes' rest before flag raising.

It's a ritual remembered with misty nostalgia by generations of New England summer campers, for whom a trumpet playing "Reveille" still evokes the smell of evergreens and breakfast, the feeling of a cool, crisp morning, and the promise of another epic day.

LIKE MILITARY ONES, RIGHT DOWN TO THE BUGLE CALLS.

My experience was different. The voice over the P.A. system every morning at the boys' camp I attended was my father's.

I had to go to summer camp.

I had no choice.

I was the owners' kid.

That made camp, for me, the opposite of what made it so memorable for everybody else: time away from home. A taste of independence. Fun.

I was the boy who didn't like summer camp. But because my family was in the business, I returned reluctantly as an adult. And it was then, one night under a star-filled sky, that I would finally come to understand the special place held by this peculiarly American—and particularly New England—institution. And the good fortune of the boy I'd once been.

That moment would arrive on the surprisingly epochal 50th anniversary of the year my grandparents dubiously chose to start a boys' camp in some distant woods beside a lake in central Maine. A few alumni to whom these quiet acres evidently mattered much more than I thought they did to me had spent the winter tracking down their childhood friends and bunkmates—every single one of them, across generations, who had ever gone there—and encouraged them to mark this half-century milestone by coming back for a reunion.

I was one of the countless former campers who received the unexpected invitation. And wondered whether any of the others, now grown men with children of their own, would actually show up.

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Summer camps are a huge but largely invisible presence, hidden as they are at distant ends of rural roads through thick woods on remote lakes. You almost never see them. Yet there are 7,000 overnight camps and 5,000 day camps in America, enrolling some 11 million campers. New Hampshire alone has 177; Maine, about 200. Uniquely American conventions, they're among the last vestiges of the independent family business, passed down through generations. More than 70 percent remain family-owned. Corporate America has little interest in the camping industry. Summer camps, on the whole, make lousy businesses, with high labor costs and insurance expenses on facilities in use for only weeks each year. When I was a kid, there were six on our lake, including a girls' camp that dated back to 1912, two coed camps, and a Jewish camp incessantly broadcasting announcements in Hebrew. "*Hachshevu, hachshevu*," they began, loud enough for us to hear. "Attention, attention!" All except our boys' camp and its sister camp have closed. So have uncounted dozens of other New England summer camps.

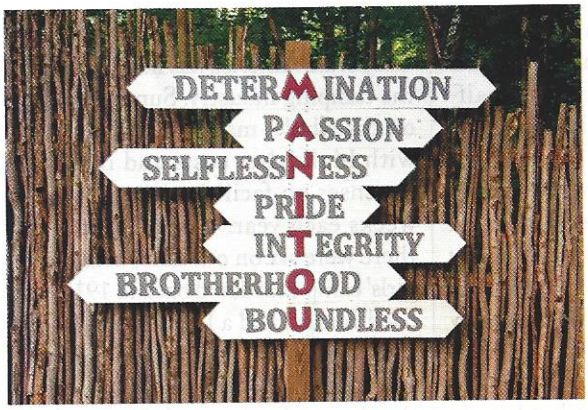
There's nothing sadder than an empty camp. The ones that close sell off their furniture and fittings before being subdivided into lots for summer cottages or, in some cases, left abandoned to the weeds and winters. We would often be among the bidders for the rowboats, sports equipment, pots and pans,

COURTESY OF JON MARCUS (FAMILY ON OPENER AND ABOVE RIGHT)

and tractors offered up for sale as red-eyed owners watched like foreclosed farmers. Almost always, off to one side, waiting to be hauled away, were piles of dusty, fading photographs of each year's smiling crop of campers, hard-won trophies, and generations of insults and initials carved into wooden walls and bedsteads. The last physical vestiges of immeasurable memories, these weren't considered worth enough to sell.

Even in their heyday, summer camps were iffy propositions. But there was nothing like a long shot to tempt my grandfather, who had the gleam in his eye (and, in general, the luck) of Arthur Miller's Willy Loman. Egged on by other relatives who had returned from World War II with unlikely nostalgia for camp life, he and my grandmother made the curious leap into the camping business when they overheard the guests of the small summer seaside hotel they ran longing for a separate place to send their kids.

Though organized American summer camping had begun in 1861 with a pair of headmasters shepherding a flock of schoolboys into the Connecticut woods, my family's camp, like a rush of others, opened when the prosperity and postwar baby boom of the late 1940s collided with the glut of those returning veterans. That's why so many old-line summer camps were, and still are, organized like military ones, right down to the bugle calls. Just back from history's greatest life-or-death struggle, the earliest counselors and directors created places where the war was on the ballfield, not the battlefield, and between Maroon and Gray, not good and evil—but where the stakes, to the campers, seemed just as high.



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: **Manitou campers with counselor Arnie Biederman, 1952; the camp's community values.** OPPOSITE: **Manitou cabins on the water. The camp was founded in 1947 and today offers a wide range of activities, from sports and adventure experiences to culinary arts, theatre, and yoga.**

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My family's camp was long established by the time I showed up as an infant with my parents, who were the directors then. A few years later, in a uniform so small it had to have been custom-made, I was moved unceremoniously into a cabin with the youngest boys. I was 4. My cabinmates were older and wealthier than I was—it was a comparatively expensive camp—and came from towns where many of them went to school together. Summer camps rely on word of mouth for much of their recruiting; friends tend to go to camp with friends, and I didn't know anybody.

Including, you might have thought, my parents. They had little time for me. Running a summer camp is a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week ordeal. There were orders to place, repairs to make, fields to groom, employees to manage, anxious mothers and fathers to soothe, activities to plan, accreditations to prepare for, and kids to nurse through swimmer's ear and homesickness. I know now that my family kept its distance from me so as not to give an impression of favoritism (fat chance), but that didn't matter to my fellow campers, who assumed I got it anyway, or my counselors, who seemed to believe that I was wired for sound. (It's also why I didn't win any of the camp awards, which went to the paying campers, though my sister—sent across the lake to relatives who ran the girls' camp—won "best all-around athlete" twice and, to my even greater annoyance, "most congenial.")

Unlike my sister, my father, my uncles, my cousins, and most of the boys who chose our camp for its then-singular emphasis on sports, I wasn't an athlete. My memories of summer camp consisted largely of being picked last.

The question that 50th summer was: How would everybody else remember it?

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Real life doesn't intrude on summer camp. That, too, is its charm, and it left us free to devote ourselves with every fiber of our beings to such all-consuming questions as which team was

COURTESY OF JON MARCUS (CAMPERS 1952)

winning Color War and what was for dessert. The Boston newspapers came by mail, two days late. There was no cable or satellite service; the TV showed mostly static. With few exceptions, we were blithely ignorant of what was happening beyond the gates. Once, in the 1950s, long before my time, some summer campers stayed well into September to avoid traveling home during a polio epidemic. In the 1960s, counselors' hair grew longer and they fretted about the draft. My earliest memory is of being awakened in the middle of the night at camp and herded in front of the lone TV, which had been dragged outside so we could watch the first man walk on the moon. Looking up from the static on the television screen, above the tops of the towering pines, we could see the moon itself in the ultimate high definition.

The same summer as the moon landing, the camp dining hall burned down. It was a beautiful building made of logs planed smooth on the inside, and it was full of history. All of it went up in flames so high they could be seen for miles. That is my second-earliest memory. My grandfather never made a lot of money, but we learned that night that he had made a lot of friends. Unasked, local businesses arrived to help. The other camps sent food and tools. The high school loaned us folding tables, and a crew of volunteers built a kitchen on the back of the gymnasium by dinnertime. We never missed a meal.

LOOKING UP FROM THE STATIC ON THE TELEVISION SCREEN, ABOVE THE TOPS OF THE TOWERING PINES, WE COULD SEE THE MOON ITSELF IN THE ULTIMATE HIGH DEFINITION.

At camp, we mostly entertained ourselves. Without TV, we had conversations in the cool breeze of the evenings on the screened-in porches of our cabins until lights out. We looked forward eagerly to the occasional dances with the girls from our sister camp, then stood shyly on one side of the room while they stood on the other. On talent nights, my cousin Max would transform into "the 2,000-year-old camper." In caveman days, he'd tell us, campers mostly spent their time running around and trying not to be devoured. The earliest activity, Max would say, was track. We'd howl with laughter, no matter how many times we'd heard this. It was also Max's job to hold his hand over the lens of the 16-millimeter camera during racy scenes on movie nights, risking an artillery barrage of pistachio shells.

Like many camps, ours was based on Native American lore—surprisingly respectfully, considering the times. The name of the camp translated from the Algonquin language as "Great Spirit." When we assembled on rows of logs in a clearing in the woods, Chief Manitou would beckon the

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SUMMER CAMP

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Brave of Sportsmanship and the Brave of Cleanliness, and then counselors in loincloths, occasionally accessorized with eyeglasses and wristwatches, would award feathers to deserving campers. No one would take this seriously now. But we all secretly prayed to the Great Spirit to be worthy of a feather. Eventually, changes in the world pervaded even this tradition. Chief Manitou, at the insistence of the camp wives, got a wife. She was named Princess Hachshevu.

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I left the camp the first chance I got, taking a job and staying in a neighbor's basement when my family drove off to Maine. I was 17. It was disorienting to find that people went about their regular routines and lived outside the woods between the day that school let out each spring and the day that it resumed each fall. It was an existence I'd never known.

I got used to it. It was 13 years before I set foot again in camp for a brief visit. By then, my father's brother was in charge. Like me, he'd been born into the business. He'd enlarged the camp significantly and expanded the market from which it drew, to survive tough economic times when all those other camps were forced to close. Now there were campers from 26 states and 6 countries, a Little League–size replica of Fenway Park, a climbing tower, and a ropes course. Since, like me, an increasing number of these new kids weren't principally athletes, there was now a theatre with a costume shop and a set designer, plus a radio station, a TV studio, scuba diving, an animation program, and photography.

Conventional summer camps, to thrive in an era of specialty and special-needs camps, are compelled today to offer endless menus of activities and to cope with the new-millennium alphabet of WiFi and iPads and ADHD. Nor are those the only ways the world has changed. When Walmart opened in our town, the local businesses that had shown up unsolicited to help us when our dining hall burned down went under. And the dances with the sister camp are now no more reserved than a Rihanna video.

Other things, however, stubbornly remained the same. The smell of a crackling campfire and the call of loons. The bonds between counselors and campers. The night sky full of stars. The peace and seclusion from the outside world. The chance for kids so overscheduled at home to live independently and make decisions for themselves.

The welcome I received on my visit was characteristic of camp. I was set upon by campers curious about camp history and how certain traditions had come to be. I became an honorary counselor and returned again in subsequent summers when I could. Popular culture has struggled, mostly unsuccessfully, to capture what makes summer camps so special. But one thing it gets right, I learned on my return, is that as much fun as the campers have, camp is even more fun for the adults.

SUMMER CAMP IS AN EXCEPTIONALLY HARD THING TO EXPLAIN. JUST ASK ANY CAMPER. IT'S A CULTURAL CURIOSITY, A SHARED SECRET.

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The year our camp turned 50, 1996, was, as many of us who came back for it would later be convinced, the summer by which other summers should be judged. There seemed to be an extra pride—a feeling of connection to the people who'd gone before, their names inscribed on all those plaques and trophies—that made this summer stand out in especially sharp focus, even among boys who normally had little consciousness of history. They appeared to hear a special call to store away the memories of camp meetings and talent shows, and barbecues with cabinmates at summer dusks, just before the sunsets turned the sky above the lake from blue to gold.

Since the day my family's summer camp opened, the people who came there took their fun as seriously as they took their competition. Away from the daily pressures of the outside world, in an environment without the distraction of girls, they laughed and joked and played elaborate pranks on one another. Summer camp, I ultimately came to understand, is one big, happy, inside joke. Campers' flaws become their trademarks and their nicknames, and, after a while, not flaws at all but points of pride. It's the ultimate recognition to be made good-natured fun of by an adult at summer camp—even better if you can sling a good comeback.

That may seem like a simple insight, but it took me much of my life to reach it. Summer camp is an exceptionally hard thing to explain. Just ask any camper. It's a cultural curiosity, a shared secret. In these safe and peaceful throwbacks to another time, isolated behind tall stands of trees in far-flung towns, friendships are fast and abiding. Learning comes unconsciously, about such things as leadership and teamwork—how to win, and how to lose. Free of parents, campers find the confidence to try new things. They know that they're among friends who'll cheer them on no matter what.

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I spent more time than usual at camp during that 50th summer, which was among the hardest to allow to end. As if to prolong it, no one slept much on the last few nights. It was a weary bunch of counselors and directors who loaded exhausted campers onto predawn flights and weepy bus trips home. But there was another, massive job ahead: The alumni were coming. At least, we hoped they were. We didn't have time to worry, though. With only hours to prepare, there were towels and sheets to wash, beds to make, a banquet to prepare.

And then, of all things, a limousine rolled up the dirt road to the office. In it was a former camper who'd become a high-powered Hollywood agent. As he emerged, a second car arrived. Its driver and the agent stared. They smiled. They laughed. And then they hugged. All of us around them stopped what we were doing. And smiled, too. This was going to be good.

Soon there was a steady stream; hundreds of former campers returned to celebrate this place together. Many had remained close friends; others hadn't seen each other since their childhoods, but picked up right where they'd left off. Former-camper fathers came with former-camper sons. They told stories. They sang songs by the lake. They played baseball under the lights in the replica of Fenway Park. They told more stories. Cousin Max reprised the 2,000-year-old camper, commenting on the irony that many of the people in the room were much closer to actually being 2,000 years old than they'd been when he'd débuted it.

Late that night, and well into the wee hours of the morning, many of us gathered around a campfire. We went around the circle, sharing our memories of camp. Some of these alumni, who'd left their workaday worlds for this reunion, were surprised to find that in this little stretch of tall trees on the quiet lake, some athletic feat or epic prank had made them legends among young campers they'd never met.

I was the last to share my thoughts that night beside the fire. Almost all of these people knew me, and had since I'd been born. They were family. I realized I was among friends who would cheer me on no matter what. They remembered my ambivalence about growing up as the owners' kid. I reintroduced myself anyway. I'd been at camp forever, I said, to laughter. Then I paused for effect. After all, I'd learned my comic timing here, at camp. It was only one of the things, it turned out, that I'd picked up in that place. Including on that night, beneath the stars.

"And all this," I finally said, "could have been mine."

More photos at: YankeeMagazine.com/SummerCamp

Jon Marcus is a travel writer, regular *Yankee* and *Boston Globe* contributor and cofounder of *MySecretBoston.com*. His books include *Unknown New England* and *The Complete Illustrated Guidebook to Boston's Public Parks and Gardens.*