

YMCA OF COLUMBUS
A BRIEF HISTORY OF CAMP ALFRED L. WILLSON

“Camp Willson is a bit of modern civilization. This little history proposes to perpetuate and document the fine memories from the experiences of men of many walks who have lived together happily upon the shores of Lake Mac-O-Chee.”

John W. Pontius, General Secretary
YMCA
January 26, 1932
from “A History of Men’s Camp”

Camp Alfred L. Willson is centered around a natural spring-fed lake formed during the last glacial period in Ohio 14,000 years ago. In the 1850’s, the lake was initially named Lake Spencer for a man who used to make counterfeit silver dollars in a log cabin overlooking the lake. The lake was later renamed Silver Lake and finally, Mac-O-Chee. Other names for the Lake have included Blaylocks Lake and Balards Lake.

Many of the trees in the central camp area are virgin white and red oak of over 250 years in age, and one oak destroyed in the 1982 dining hall fire was estimated to be over 350 years old. Because of the lake and the forests surrounding the property, the Shawnee Indians of Western Ohio frequently lived nearby. Arrowheads and other Native American relics are often found both in the lake and in the surrounding camp and farmland.

In the late 1800’s, the attraction of the property owned by a local resident. H.M. Annot, led to the development of summer cottages and an amusement park. Bellefontaine residents were able to reach the park by an electric interurban train line. A bath house was constructed over the lake, which eventually deteriorated and fell into the lake. The remains can still be viewed by scuba divers. Also constructed was a dance hall and bowling alley where the Conference Center is now located.

For several years nothing was done with the property. In 1918, the Metropolitan YMCA of Columbus decided to use the property for its Boys’ Camp program previously held at Camp Budd, directed by Boys’ Work Secretary, Mahlon G. Bailey. Harry Spyker rented the property in 1918 for three years with an option to buy. The camp at that time was named Camp Bailey, but was later renamed Camp Alfred L. Willson following the purchase of the 135 acre property in 1921 made possible by a monetary gift (\$20,000) from Columbus carriage maker, Alfred L. Willson. At that time lodging consisted of tents pitched around the amusement park restaurant that eventually became the initial camp dining hall. Pictures of the tents are still preserved. The YMCA’s camping programs began in 1910 with 128 boys at Camp Budd, 14 miles from Columbus. In 1913 Harry Spyker took 35 boys for 10 days to the Willson site, naming the camp, Camp Bailey in honor of Mahlon Baily, the boys director.

In 1925, an additional 201 acres on the west side of the lake was purchased from the Ward Family. This area has become the majority of camp farmland since that time and included the area known as the “Pig Barn.”

The area included a 150 year old log cabin located next to the still existent wind pump. In 1963, an additional 80 acres was added to the camp with the purchase of the Fawcett Farm, negotiated by Camp Board Member, Wayne Geissinger. The Fawcett Farm was to become the Ranch Camp and later, in 1970, was dedicated to Guy Rostofer, camp caretaker from 1929 to 1986. One and three fourth acres of

property was purchased from Glaude Tanger to provide control of the outlet of the lake from Blue Jacket Creek. In 1998, an additional 46 acres, located on the south side of County Road 11, across from the camp entrance road was purchased from Tom Ewing. This acreage is currently used for hay production for the horses.

The year 1921 also marked the construction of the still functional summer cabins, called at the time “tent cabins: because they consisted only of a roof, concrete floor, and canvas sides. Nine cabins were built in that year. On June 30, 1927, Pettigrew Hall was dedicated to Edward S. Pettigrew. Mr Pettigrew was a YMCA board member and Vice President of the Godman Company. He was requested to pay a \$2,000 fine or make a public apology for his constant criticisms of the camp’s athletic facilities. He took the request seriously and gave \$40,000 to build a recreation building and create better athletic fields. According to reports of the day, “The thousand and more people who, last Sunday afternoon, attended the dedication of Pettigrew Hall and Pettigrew Athletic Field at Camp Willson on Lake Mac-O-Chee bore convincing testimony by their presence and enthusiastic expressions to the deep appreciation of the public for the generous gift of the donor, Mr. E.S. Pettigrew...” The back three summer cabins (10-12) were built in 1928 bringing camp capacity to 144 at that time. The construction of the cabins, Pettigrew, and the remodeling of the 1896 dining hall was completed by the “Development Company” of “old Man Askren,” a Bellefontaine resident. In 1950, an Amish group from Plain City, led by Attlee Mullett, was hired for the construction of the Arts & Crafts Building, Health Center, and repairs to Pettigrew Hall and the dining hall. Guy and Dot Rostofer, the caretakers, lived in a double log cabin for the first 8 years of their stay on the property. A new caretaker’s house was built for \$5,800 by the Costin Brothers of Bellefontaine in 1937. They lived in this house until Guy’s retirement in 1986. Guy had begun work at camp in 1929 as the camp farmer. In 1968, a Capital Campaign raised the funds to winterize portions of Pettigrew Hall (the dining hall) and to build two winterized “log cabins” and the “new facility” bath house. A 150 year old log cabin was located by Program Director Thom Peters, and donated to the camp in 1980, by Bellefontaine Mayor, Bob Tynan. The cabin was moved to the site and restored by October 1981. The cabin was restored by Guy Rostofer and CETA Workers.

The “Waterfront Building” known as the “Davis Building” for Ron Davis, is one of the YMCA’s men campers who volunteered much time and material in its construction in 1975. In 1975, winterized of the Arts and Crafts Building was also completed with Mr. Davis as the principal motivator.

The outstanding communication system (telephone & P.A. System) was built by Bob Slemmer and installed around 1950. Brad Kunze was instrumental in it’s maintenance until Inter-Tel Technologies of Columbus donated a used telephone system in the spring of 1997. The 1950 switchboard still served the camp well at that time, although it was not “up to” the new technologies of the 1990’s. Both Bob (who died in 1991) and Brad are to be commended for all their hard work in providing camp with wonderful service.

The next construction phase at the camp was made necessary as a result of the April 9, 1982, fire that totally destroyed the dining hall. The fire was discovered at 1:30 a.m., but the fire departments from Bellefontaine and Degraff could do nothing but protect the other buildings in the area from the inferno. Construction of the conversion of Pettigrew Hall into a dining facility was completed in December 1982, and three winterized cabins were completed in March 1983, as a result of a campaign led by Ohio State University Basketball Coach Eldon Miller, and Board Member Ted Magnuson. The Conference/Outdoor Education Activities Center (The ClarArt Center) was completed in December 1983. Two additional winterized cabins were added in 1993 (Yasenhoff Cabin) and 1998 (Verick Cabin), bringing our winterized capacity to 200.

There have been few directors of YMCA Camp Alfred L. Willson. *Harry Spyker* (1913-1934) was the first director and proved to be a strict director and a real gentleman. “Mon Spyker” added the calming

element and often could be seen sitting in a rocking chair on the dining hall porch talking with a homesick camper. Under Harry, a seven year progressive series of awards was created, ranging from the first year "Brave" to the "Grand Sequin (Sachem?)" which was only available if a camper remained in camp the entire summer. Only 30 to 35 people have ever achieved this award. Harry would later become the General Secretary of the YMCA of Columbus.

Hank Baldwin directed Camp Willson from 1934 to 1938, and was known for his good rapport with everyone. He changed the general mood from the militaristic approach of Spyker to a more easy-going style. Baldwin was responsible for a major emphasis on crafts, dramatics and the expressive arts, with these areas being major criteria for counselor selection.

Casey Klippel was a very ambitious, well-liked director from 1938 to 1959. He was known as a tremendous scrounger in locating equipment. Family camping started as a thank you to those who helped on the many work weekends at camp. Klippel was to be followed by *Bob Schmidt* (1959 to 1961) as director.

Al Deiss (1961 to 1969) started the Outdoor Education Program at Camp Willson in 1968, raised the funds for the winterized log cabins, winterization of Pettigrew and the dining hall, and secured the CB's and Y's Men's Clubs to build the log cabins. Following Deiss' death the chapel was named for him, having previously been named for Hank Baldwin. Interim directors were *Gale Galbreath* and *Bob Hildreth* (1969) and *Mike Daum* (1970) following Deiss' death.

Frank Wilcox (1971 to 1978) is most often credited with the recent program development of Camp Willson. He began co-educational summer camp programming in 1971, and developed a highly regarded older camper Ranger Program in 1973. Under Frank the camp hired its first full time Program Director, Paul Sestina, who developed the Camp's outdoor education programs. Frank's wife, Margaret (a nurse) reorganized and upgraded the health and food services, the later responsibility being assumed full time by Mary Clark in 1975.

Camp use expanded to include fall, winter, and spring Indian Guide/Princess camping programs, as well as band camps and church programs. Men's Camp began its spring weekends under Frank (first camp was March 20, 1968) and a professionally conceived Master Plan was designed by Frank and the site planner, Art Harrison. That Master Plan would become the blueprint for construction following the 1982 fire.

Bruce Boyer (1979 to 1984) brought with him the concept for a Building Trades training program that made major renovations to many of the camp's facilities. Bruce is most noted for several "Christian emphasis" programs at Camp Willson including the Rags and Leathers program and the Christian Leadership Conferences. We continue this CLC tradition today with 204 people attending in 2000. During this time the horseback riding programs were offered on a year round basis. The 1982 dining hall fire dramatically made it necessary for the camp to build three cabins, a Conference Center, and convert Pettigrew Hall into a dining hall.

Tim Milbern (1984 to 1986) expanded the summer camp programs. The Frontier Village was built and initiated, the Ranch Cabins and Chuckwagon built and the summer camp program was changed to its current format, using "Adventure Areas". Toledo Public Schools moved their Outdoor Education Program to Willson in January of 1985 and remained at Willson until December of 1991. This program addition allowed Camp Willson to expand its outdoor education program to 36 weeks of programming. Under Tim's leadership, the YMCA Board changed the name of camp from Camp Alfred L. Willson to the YMCA Willson Outdoor Center to reflect its year round focus and multiple programs. *Rob Habicht*

was the 10th camp Director from 1986-88. *Anne Brienza* (1989 to present) first served as Outdoor Education Director from 1984 before assuming the position as the 11th Camp Director.

The most unique program at Camp Willson is the Men's Camp program. Initiated in 1920 as a "dream" by Harry Spyker and YMCA Physical Director Ernest W. Roehm, Men's Camp was "for the older boys of mature years." Roehm was a YMCA Physical Director for 41 years and is also noted for founding the first Business Men's Club in YMCA's around the world. He was described as "a builder of men" according to a plaque awarded in memorium in 1947 to his son, YMCA Director, Ralph Roehm. Men's Camp was created for the purpose -- "to build men physically, mentally, and spiritually" In its inaugural year, Men's Camp was attended by 47 campers under the first president Robert F. Pfeiffer, but more than doubled to 97 by the following summer. Today it serves 120 participants and draws campers from all over the country annually. Much of Camp Willson's future leadership will come from the Men's Camp Program. A special history of Men's Camp was written by Ely D. Miller in 1932, depicting the early years of this great fellowship of friends. The Men's Camp History from 1943 to the present was meticulously preserved by long time Men's Camper and Central YMCA member Lew Larson, who passed away in 1997. His forethought makes this Camp's history so much richer!

One off-shoot of Men's Camp is the "Birds' Fund." A group of men's campers noticed the need to replace dying trees. Funds were collected and five trees purchased. Since then the Birds' Fund has resurfaced tennis courts, rebuilt the shuffle board courts, and partially replaced the boat docks, built the climbing wall, provided all the boathouse equipment, built the addition on the Medical building and too many items to mention.

What is the Bird's Fund? It stands for:

- B** Brotherhood (where else is it better)
- I** Inspiration (supplied by nature and the Sky Pilot)
- R** Recreation or Remembrance (for those who have passed during the past year and the memories of whom we cherish.

- D** Dedication or Development (Camp improvement naturally, this is where the money goes.

- S** Spirit

Camp Willson continues to be an important factor to many families. Clayton Rhea first worked in camp kitchen in 1938 (following his employment at the Bellefontaine Railroad YMCA), and later, sons Tracy, Gary and Phil were to become staff members. Granddaughters Pam, Alicia, and Michelle have all worked on the staff. Tracy's grandchildren are now campers! A number of other two generation families have also been staff members, including Bob and Robbie Herbst; Ann, Frank, Dean, Beth, and Cathy Wilcox; Ralph, John, and Sue Ramey; Guy and Chuck Rostofer to name only a few. Clifford Hadley began taking pictures at camp in 1921, a tradition that has been passed on to sons, Vance and Jack. Jack still serves the camp in this way. Jack's son, Mike, was a staff member at camp for several years. It is because of these and other fine people that Camp Alfred L. Willson has a great future for generations to come.

Sources: The History of Men's Camp; the research of Bruce Boyer, Thom Peters, Frank Wilcox, and vivid memories of Guy Rostofer, Bob Hildreth, Tracy Rhea, and Jim Roehm. Revised in 1998 by Anne Brienza

Who Was Alfred L. Willson?

Alfred L Willson was born in 1856 and was a lifelong resident of Columbus, attending Central High School. Along with his father-in-law, he organized the Buckeye Buggy Company and served as its president until 1898. After the turn of the century, Mr Willson then devoted himself to the securities market, specializing in utilities stocks.

In 1920, Mr Willson created the the Alfred L Willson Charitable Foundation, which supported child serving agencies and other community organizations. The Willson Foundation is considered parent to the Columbus Foundation. The YMCA Willson Outdoor Center continues to receive annual contributions from the Alfred L Willson Charitable Fund to provide scholarships for children in need. Mr Willson died in 1941.

Source: pamphlet on the Alfred L Willson Charitable Fund from the Columbus Foundation.