

Excerpts from

We Took to the Hills

Written

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Warren
1952-1958

Funding the Camp Building Program

When I came to Warren County there was some mention that we were in a 4-H Camp building program with Hamilton and Clermont Counties. I didn't realize the full impact of the building program until one day Mary Wiseman, the Home Agent, mentioned that we were going to have to raise several thousand dollars as our share of the project. A check of the 4-H camp treasury indicated a balance of \$350 or so and a few cartons of cushions that were to be sold as a fund raising project at the Harness Races at the fairgrounds. Nobody wanted to sell the cushions so we finally wound up giving them away as door prizes at activities and events. The other two counties had been raising funds for years with candy Easter Egg Sales and other such programs. Consequently, they had several thousand dollars in their treasuries.

The payment on the camp site land was coming due and we had to come up with our proportionate share of the money. It was winter and most 4-H clubs did not meet in the winter time. It would be almost impossible to mount any kind of sale program involving the club members at this time of the year. The only alternative seems to be a money drive to ask friends of 4-H to help us out. Maynard Hagemeyer agreed to head up the drive and the result was seventeen thousand dollars in contributions. This was enough to get us off the ground with our share.

Raising money was not one of my best suits. I came from a conservative family and I just was inexperienced in asking people for money. Just about every time I met the Agents from the other two counties they asked if we were going to be able to come up with our share of the camp money. Frankly, I didn't know whether we could or not. I could now breathe easier for a while.

Our money problems were further resolved one day when an older gentleman came into the office and asked if we were interested in a money raising project. John Vermilya, the 4-H Agent in Montgomery County, told him to stop by to talk with me. He was C.V. Gilgrist with Stauble Potato Chips out of Hamilton. They had a program where 4-H Clubs could put on a potato chip sale and get part of the profits. They provided incentive prizes for the individuals and clubs that sold the most chips. The 4-H members took orders and then on the selected dates the chips would be delivered by semi-trucks to selected points in the county. It sounded good and after it was presented to the 4-H Council, they voted to go along with the sale. The result

was that the 4-H Clubs in Warren County sold enough potato chips that year and each year following to cover the costs of the 4-H Camp construction program. The appropriate name for the camp might well have been 4-H Camp Potato Chip.

In addition to being an excellent fund raiser the chip sale gave us exposure and an awareness of the camping program in Warren County which helped raise camp enrollment from less than 25 to more than 150 young people. We also had camps for the men and the women which were well attended. For our youth camps, the older young people (teens) served as the Camp Counselors and they did an excellent job. Many of these young people would go on to college and this training gave them a good start when they went off to school.

Once the camp was operational Montgomery County joined the Camp Corporation. Other counties also brought several hundred 4-H members to the camp and other groups rented the facilities.

Camp Construction

As I traveled down Clarksville Road and across the little ravine where 4-Hers hunted trilobites in the blue gray Ordovician limestone, I could see the 4-H Camp dining hall on the hills through the big oak trees. During the camping season I spent several hours at night sitting on the brow of the hill watching the lightning to the west wondering if the thunderstorms would hit the camp area. Storms were always a dreaded time with a camp full of young people. The camp brought back memories of cold camp corporation planning meetings as we huddled around the old oil drum heater to keep warm in the open front gun club building. The camp site was purchased from a defunct gun club and some of the members were still unhappy about the transaction. Most of the people were glad to see the camp come in for with the amount of water the camp used it would enable the little village of Clarksville to get a low interest loan for a city water system from the government. Some of the local citizenry were against the sale of the land that served as a place for carousing and a "Lover's Lane" for the community.

Not too many years ago the area where the dining lodge now stood was a wild blackberry patch. I turned the first shovel full of soil on the project for which I am very proud. The lodge with its long front porch blended perfectly into the woodland setting. The long overhanging branches of the tall white oak out in front made an ideal area for crafts, ping pong, shuffleboard or just sitting on the benches and enjoying the cool breezes during camper free time. There wasn't very much free time for we always tried to keep the campers busy with interesting activities. Camp can be fun but idle time leads to homesickness.

Like most projects the dining hall plans went through a series of revisions and changes. I came to Warren County when the first plans were unveiled. I was younger than the other two agents and probably was considered somewhat radical. Both agents had been on the job for several years and seemed to have forgotten what a new agent goes through in getting adjusted to the job plus being faced with the added pressure of raising funds for a project as large as the camp development.

When the plans were unveiled they were a disappointment to me. The proposed dining hall, which was also used as a general purpose building for recreation, assemblies and other such activities, was a plain rectangular structure with regular house type tongue and groove siding. There were very few tiny windows along the sides. It looked more like the chicken houses farmers were building back in those days. I made the mistake of stating this fact. But, if our county was putting money into the project I thought we should have a voice in determining what type of building we would like to have.

Sensing that most of the members of the committee were not happy about the proposed structure the chairman asked for suggestions on what type of building the group wanted. When he called on me I suggested something like those that the State Park and National Park Systems built, rustic and easy to maintain. The other members of the committee agreed and Ken Battles, the Extension Agricultural Engineer at Ohio State who was designing the building was asked to take these suggestions under consideration and come back with a new design.

A few months later Ken Battles was back with a design that included a broad front porch and a kitchen on the back side of the dining area. There was a basement under the kitchen area to house hot water tanks, storage area and restroom facilities for the kitchen staff. The construction was to be horizontal 2 x 8's rounded to resemble logs on the bottom half of the hall with vertical wide boards on the upper half with batten strips to cover the cracks between the vertical boards. He recommended redwood lumber for the outside materials and regular pine for the interior.

The new plan was quite an improvement over the old one and surprisingly the cost was not that much different. The group approved the design right off. Carl Bibbee, the Hamilton County Agent, found the redwood lumber at the Alf Lumber Company in Cincinnati and since it was some they had had in stock for some time they gave us a good price. In addition they would plane the 2 x 8's to give the log effect so we were ready to get started.

It was a lucky day for the Camp Corporation when we were able to get a retired civil engineer by the name of Dick Kruckemeyer from the Pleasant Plain community to supervise the dining hall construction. Dick had built bridges, buildings, roads and other such projects all over the world during his career with big construction companies. He knew how to keep costs down by using a couple older carpenters and the volunteer labor from 4-H club advisors, parents and others who gave of their time.

In the late summer of 1953 the dozer excavated the hole for the basement and soon the walls were up and the dining room footers and floor were poured. It was a race to get the walls up and the roof on before the snow came but we made it. It was a beautiful place to work. Those cool fall days with clear blue skies surrounded by colorful leaves seem to make the chill in the air not all that bad. We worked through the winter on those days when the weather permitted.

Kruckemeyer was a little on the temperamental side. He liked quality work. A couple times he threatened to quit and he really couldn't be blamed. He was doing everything he could to keep the costs down and when some of the agents questioned the costs of certain materials it got under his hide. Then, when he realized that we were a bunch of amateurs who knew very little about building he laughed at the things we did and went on with the job. Most people probably would have walked out on us but Dick knew we needed him. He and Mrs. Kruckemeyer never had children and I think down deep he felt that, although being a little on the crusty side, this was his contribution to the young people of the area. The Camp Corporation owes Dick Kruckemeyer a debt of gratitude for his work on the 4-H Camp buildings.

The spring of 1954 we moved in for the camping season. The first couple years we didn't have the money nor the time to build cabins for the campers so we bought some surplus army tents and rented others. Somewhere we found wood floor sections that worked out just right to keep the cots and the campers belongings up off the floor. It really wasn't as bad as it sounded. At night the campers could hear the outdoor sounds of the wind in the trees and feel the cool breezes better than in the cabins that came later.

Mary Michaels was on the camp board from Warren County. She and her husband had a ready-mix concrete business at Mainville. Whenever we bought a concrete floor for a tent which we later used for a cabin floor they gave us another floor free. Little by little the cabins were built. They followed the same redwood construction as the dining hall.

We didn't have the money for a swimming pool those first years so we hired a bus company from Lebanon to transport the campers over to the Lake Cowan State Park where we swam at the public beach. It was another arrangement that worked out quite well. The campers were divided into tribes and while one tribe was swimming the others were in crafts, planning camp fire or other activities.

We looked at several pools before deciding on a prefab pool from the Dowling Pool Company in West Virginia. Maynard Hagemeyer dozed out the pit and the bottom was poured. The sides were precast at the factory then trucked to the site and hoisted in place using a large crane. The sides rested in a little gutter in the floor and they were caulked to keep them from leaking. Big triangular shaped pilasters positioned along the sides held the side walls securely bolted in place. We painted it a light blue and the sand and gravel filter system kept the water a beautiful crystal clear. A few lights were installed so every once in a while we varied the

program and had a night swim which the kids enjoyed in the cool night air. We didn't have money for concrete walks and apron around the pool so the first couple of years we just used gravel.

The next year we added a lighted blacktop multipurpose area which was used for volleyball, basketball and other such recreation activities during the day and circle games, relays and square dancing at night. Previous to this we had used the dining room for recreation after the tables and benches were moved to one end out of the way. Sometimes we used the area out in front of the porch, but this had its drawbacks when rain made the area wet and a trifle muddy. Little by little the facilities grew and conducting a camp was easier although when we talked with the campers who came year after year surprisingly most liked the facilities when they were a little more rustic.

Vo Ag teacher Joe Kersey's Adult Farmer class at Lebanon High School built tables and benches for the camp out of lumber that Mrs. Patterson from Lebanon gave them. When the men jokingly asked about their turn at camp we took them up on the suggestion and the result was a four county camp for men.

Men's Camp

Joe Kersey's Adult Farmer class at Lebanon High School built tables and benches for the camp and when the men jokingly asked about their turn at camp we took them up on the suggestion and the result was a four county camp for men. A planning committee consisting of two men and the County Agent from each county got together to work out the details for a weekend camp.

The Hamilton County group volunteered Milt Knowlton and some of his buddies to put on a fish fry on Saturday evening. They fried the fish for a church social each year in Cincinnati and they had their system down pat. They rented a portable bottled gas deep fry outfit from the Lynch Fish Company and got the fish and their supplies there. They had their system all worked out. Montgomery County volunteered former County Agent O.L. Cunningham from their county to be the short speaker for the program. The menu committee suggested fish, potato salad, baked beans, cole slaw, sliced tomatoes with soft drinks and coffee for the evening meal followed with ice cold watermelon served later to top off the evening.

Sunday morning breakfast of sausage, hash brown potatoes and eggs was overwhelmingly approved with a ham dinner at noon. Warren County was to get a minister for a short service out under the big oak trees after breakfast. It was a loosely structured affair but it turned out just right.

Some of the early arrivals drove the horseshoe pegs in the ground out in front of the lodge and the contests were on. Farmers who never thought they would ever have the opportunity to try their skill at shuffleboard were now jumping up and down trying to get the puck to land on the numbers in the triangle at the other end of the court. Ping pong on the front porch, breeze shooting out under the trees or just walking around looking the camp over seemed to keep everybody busy. Quite often you would hear someone say, "Here's how we did it", and he would go to great length to explain what they had done on the building or other project that they had a hand in. After the fish fry and the watermelon feed which came later, some of the fellows tried their hand at volleyball and others got the euchre tournament going.

After a while some started to the tents and men or boys, you could hardly tell the difference with all the laughing, pranks and fun that went on that night. Morning seemed to come very early but most of the men showed up for the breakfast that never smelled better on the cool morning air.

The brief church service out under the oaks was very stirring and well attended. In the middle of the afternoon after the ham dinner they started to drift off to home with an "I'll see you next year" or some similar farewell message as they headed down the camp road home. And, most did return next year. During the year when they met there was the greeting of "How are you camper" or some other reminder of the camp last summer. It was a small reward for the men who had helped to make the camp possible.

Summer Thunderstorms Bring Creative Solutions to Problems

The early June air was bright and clear as I drove on toward West Union past John Settlemeier's seed corn farm. The rain last night had washed the dust out of the air leaving it clean and bright as it does in early June. It was on just such a morning a few summers ago that John had really helped us out in a tight spot. The circumstances were almost the same as last night but not as severe. The electric and telephone service had been knocked out by a storm that hit the camp area early in the evening and lasted most of the night.

It had been a fearful experience for all 130 campers. Luckily no one was hurt. All night long the sharp lightning cracked and winds buffeted the area as rain pelted down. The high winds flattened most of the tents and mattresses, clothing and blankets were soaked. Just before the storm hit the counselors brought the campers to the dining lodge, which was lighted by lanterns, and they spent the rest of the night there. Around midnight when it looked like they were going to be there for a while they tried to sleep on the tables and benches but with little success.

Luckily the camp was filled with older campers but it was still a frightening experience with the sharp lightning and blowing winds.

The dining lodge was in our county so quite often we received a call to take something to the camp that was needed in a hurry. The next morning I called the camp to see if there was anything they needed since I was going to be in that area. After trying several times to get through I learned from the telephone operator that the lines were out of order due to the storm last night. At Lebanon, 16 miles away I had no idea that the storm had been that bad.

Right away I headed to the camp to see if everything was alright. As I drove up the winding road to the dining lodge I was greeted by a sight that looked like a gypsy camp. Wet clothing, blankets and other wet objects were hanging in the sun all over the place on clotheslines, bushes, rafters, and any other available spot for drying. John Vermilya, the 4-H Agent from Montgomery County who was with the group, had left the camp to try to find a telephone that worked so he could call his office in Dayton to have them contact the parents to come and get their children. Camping was over for a few days at least. The soaked mattresses didn't look like they would ever dry out. Then, we hit on the idea of trying to locate a corn or hay dryer to dry them.

John Settlemeier with his seed corn operation had the closest and largest drying unit around. I drove over to his place. He laughed when I told him about our predicament, even though he realized it wasn't a laughing matter, and then he said to bring the mattresses over. I told him there might be a hundred but he said to bring them on and he would give it a try.

The dryer did the job and we were back in business ready for the next camp three days later. John never would take anything for the electric and gas used. He was a real help to us.