



A Camp Vega counsellor, in shirt and tie, heads across Charleston Lake with a crew of campers, before the age of life jacket or boating rules. Other campers follow behind. (Picture courtesy of Athens Historical Society)



Camp Vega director described Charleston as a picturesque lake where young boys from the city could get back to nature in a wholesome environment.

CHARLESTON'S CAMP VEGA, A Haven for Wealthy American Kids

By Sally Smid

The aim of Camp Vega on Charleston Lake was to not only give campers a happy vacation, but a place where counsellors could be “sterling examples and instill into lads, the highest standards of manliness, fair play and sportsmanship”. The Camp was built in 1918 by American W. J. Hazel on Green Island at Webster’s Bay. He employed local help, giving Charleston men some welcome work. Hazel’s venture was based on his belief in the necessity of “getting in touch with the soil” and he sought to attract boys from urban areas, mostly New York. “If our boys are not exposed to nature, they will lose their vigour and moral stamina and fall a readier victim to the throttling cares and devitalizing tendencies that are the result of our crowded city life,” he warned.

The camp was also intended to provide “clean companionship, a wholesome environment, and inspiring leadership to mould the ideals and character of a growing boy” which would not be so possible for their parents to provide. The costly experience was promoted as “a wise investment in a lad’s future”.

Camp Vega’s staff included a doctor, nurse, and counsellors, many of whom were

graduates of Yale, Princeton and Harvard. There were 60-75 boys in attendance for each session. The camp included 22 permanent buildings including the Main Lodge with a large fireplace and an extensive library. This is where “stunt nights” and theatre events took place. It connected to a spacious dining hall where “Ralph”, one of the “finest camp chefs in America”, and his staff provided abundant and appetizing cuisine. There were also a variety of screened bungalows to house the campers as well as docks, boats, shops, a baseball field and tennis and volley ball courts. Swimming took place off the point of the island. Horseback riding was also offered and the horses were stabled at the Harbourview Hotel. It was noted that in one-week campers had caught 98 pounds of fish. There was quite a strict daily schedule that was followed, beginning before 7 am. The program also included overnight camping trips. There were a variety of trophies that were awarded to worthy recipients each session.

Locals recall seeing campers wearing grey uniforms and caps labelled with Camp Vega. The Camp put on a regatta each year and also provided entertainment at the Athens Town Hall. Many locals noted that campers were courteous and respectful and that

they appeared to be quite well off as they always seemed to have lots of spending money which contributed to the local economy. Furthermore, parents who came to visit stayed at the local hotels. Fathers were invited to stay in September after the camp season ended. “Haven’t you men folks ever longed for a real Man’s Vacation?” the director promoted. “Where you could get away from the women-folks (GodBless’Em) and go around in your old clothes without being told to go and dress for dinner...or have a cigarette in bed when you wanted to?” It seemed to be an attempt to increase income for Vega.

The Camp was sold in 1930 to a Miss Witherell of Rochester, New York. She arrived with 40 girls that summer. The girls were mostly confined to the island but did go on hikes and took canoe and motor boat trips. Later her brother, Dr. Fred Witherell, took over the island and lived there for several years. It is now owned by cottagers.

A lot has changed over a hundred years, but it is clear that cottagers and tourists still come to the Charleston Lake to enjoy the beautiful surroundings away from the rigours of daily life for perhaps many of the same motives that founded Camp Vega. **LH**