



Camp Wannakumbac

Giving rural and farm kids camp experiences for almost 70 years | BY JILL WINZOSKI

To say Camp Wannakumbac lives up to its name isn't an exaggeration. Year after year, generation after generation, the camp has been a traditional gathering place for kids who, more often than not, were encouraged by their parents and grandparents who camped there when they were young.

"We laugh with our staff and say it's a bit of a cult," said camp manager Janet Gusdal, who has been managing the camp for the past 25 years. "Once we get you here, you never want to leave."

Gusdal says Camp Wannakumbac is one of the few camps in Manitoba that isn't church-affiliated. It was established in 1948 by members of the Manitoba Federation of Agriculture, the predecessor to the Manitoba Farm Bureau and later Keystone Agricultural Producers, or KAP.

According to the 40-year anniversary publication *Camp Wannakumbac — The Dream and the Development* — the Federation had spent eight years "establishing a permanent site where youth work would be a continuous program."

"It was a co-operative, informative learning experience for

farm kids," Gusdal explained. "They [the organizers] realized rural kids needed to meet other rural kids. Nowadays kids move everywhere, but in those days you just knew the kids that were in your area or church."

Today, the camp welcomes both rural and urban youth ages eight to 16, although 75 per cent of them are from farms and rural communities. The rest mostly hail from urban areas like Brandon — which, too, has strong rural ties.

Retired Cypress River farmer and former KAP vice-president, Glenn Young, attended the camp for two seasons about 55 years ago, when he was 12 and 13. He recalled his time there fondly, describing how his camp experience helped shape his formative years. Not only did he make good friends at camp, Young said a lot of those people became friends for life.

"It's when you really start to learn about people and learn how things work," he said. "Camp gives kids a real advantage. It's a good place to learn about other kids — and themselves."

He reminisced how the camp taught him self-reliance and team building, because "everybody had a job to do there."



Kids are free to express their creativity at Wannakumbac. Programming includes creative activities, lake-friendly activities, outdoor programs and sports.

One skin-thickening experience Young will never forget was as a member of the camp's Polar Bear Club, when he was required to take early-morning jumps into the jarringly cold waters of Clear Lake.

"If you did this for five days each day every morning before breakfast, you got your Polar Bear badge," he recalled. "If you know what Clear Lake is like — well, it's pretty chilly! And it's even more chilly before eight o'clock in the morning!"

Young later encouraged KAP to support the camp financially. Today, KAP is one of Wannakumbac's seven sponsors.

"Anything we can do to help promote the camp, I'm all for it," said Young. "You end up with a broader outlook on life after you come home — there's no doubt about it."

Current KAP vice-president Justin Jenner, who farms near Minnedosa, was also a Wannakumbac camper for three summers. Like Young, Jenner experienced the traditional Clear Lake shock treatment.

"That's something you really don't forget," he laughed.

He, too, remembers his time at Camp Wannakumbac fondly: making campfires, doing crafts, playing sports.

"Your days are full of stuff to do — there's not much down time," said Jenner. "It made a pretty good impression on me, I remember that."

These days, Jenner is on the camp's board of directors.

"There's often a lifetime of commitment to the place," said Gusdal. "It's very nice to see people that came as a kid to camp but have remained involved in the facility."

KEEPING CAMP AFFORDABLE

Jenner said that unlike most other camps in Manitoba, which are closer to Winnipeg, Wannakumbac's proximity to Riding Mountain National Park means there's more wilderness to explore and more to do overall. He also mentioned the fact that there aren't many camps around that aren't church-based. >

“This is just a camp for fun and that’s it,” he said. “There’s no Bible study there or anything.”

But that very fact can present a financial challenge to Wannakumbac that other camps don’t often have to face, given many churches’ sizable canvassing pool.

“It’s a fight all the time to be able to keep camp affordable; we want to keep our fees as low as possible,” Gusdal explained. “Without our sponsors, we would not be able to do this. For church camps, they can canvas in a newsletter and garner massive support across Canada, but we work really hard to raise \$5,000.”

Jenner, who has served on the board for two years, commended Gusdal for her dedicated efforts to keep the camp one of the most affordable in the province. But as costs continue to rise, that task is becoming a greater challenge.

“Janet tries really hard to keep the costs down, so she’s always looking for grants and grocery donations,” said Jenner. “Two years ago, she was thinking of raising the fees \$5 or \$10 per kid and she was pretty sad about having to do it. She knows what it means to the kids and not everybody can afford to send their kids to camp. It means a lot to her.”

Fees for the week are \$300 for younger children and \$345 for teens — costs Gusdal said are lower than all other camps. This is made possible by the camp’s sponsors who subsidize each camper by about \$75.

“Sometimes parents just can’t pay and they (at the camp) end up taking the kid anyway,” said Jenner. “She’s a really nice person, that Janet.”

Gusdal said she also matches sponsors from different communities to kids from those communities that can’t afford to go. And there is also the Manitoba Camping Association’s Sunshine Fund.

Wannakumbac’s infrastructure has recently undergone much-needed improvements thanks to generous donations and sponsorships. To celebrate the dining hall’s 50-year anniversary in 2015, the camp launched a \$130,000 renovation process that saw a new energy-efficient electric furnace, the entire hall floor replaced, the construction of a large deck in memory of Gusdal’s late husband, Darren Gusdal, the installation of \$10,000 in new windows, and renovations to the original bathrooms.

“Everything was gutted and put in brand spanking new,” said Gusdal. “I don’t know what we’d do without our sponsors. They really keep the place going.”

But without continued donations to the camp’s Legacy Fund which is allotted for capital projects and infrastructure improvements, Gusdal said it’s going to be hard to keep Camp Wannakumbac going.

“If you want to see this place around in 50 years, you need to consider contributing to the Legacy Fund,” she urged.

ANOTHER BUSY SUMMER

These days, the camp reaches its 500 camper limit every summer, up from about 400 campers when Janet Gusdal and her husband Darren first came to the camp 25 years ago.



Camp manager Janet Gusdal on the deck of the newly renovated dining hall. She says without continued donations to the camp’s Legacy Fund for capital projects and infrastructure improvements, it could be hard to keep Camp Wannakumbac going.

At that time, she worked as a nurse in Minnedosa, while her husband worked as a teacher. It just so happened that he was looking for a change from teaching and the camp was also having trouble finding nurses. So the pair, along with their one-year-old son, decided to give it a go — and the rest is history.

“We thought we’d be here for a few years and after the fifth year we went: ‘OK, I guess we’re here for a while,’” laughed Janet.

Throughout the years, Janet and Darren split the work between them. Darren did most of the public relations and maintenance duties, and Janet took care of the more behind-the-scenes secretarial and organizational tasks.

“He was the meeter and greeter of all our rental groups, because he just loved people,” Janet said.

Unfortunately, Darren passed away in June 2014. Since her husband’s passing, Janet has managed to keep herself and the camp going.

“Some days it’s quite a challenge,” she said. “Everything under the sun, we did together. Ninety per cent of it, I now do myself. Some of it was autopilot and some of it was a case of ‘the best thing for me was to just keep busy.’”

Janet is grateful for all the support from people around her.

“The last three summers, I’ve just been a very lucky person with having the right people come in and help when I need help,” she said.

During the fall and winter months the shelter facilities, consisting of four bunkhouses and two fancier buildings with washrooms, are used by a range of people: Westman service

groups, elementary and high schools from Manitoba and Saskatchewan, Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, a choir group and even a quilting group.

While the camp is busy throughout the winter, it runs full bore from June to October.

The camp hires 30 people during its peak season, including Gusdal and camp counsellors, a secretary, a groundskeeper and usually a student for maintenance. In the winter, that number drops to about five.

The difference in the summer is the programming that's offered, whereas in fall and winter, schools and other groups run their own programming — such as building quinzhees to sleep in overnight, for example.

Camp Wannakumbac's summer programs are plentiful and diverse. They include lake-friendly activities such as swimming, fishing, kayaking and canoeing. Creative programs that include photography, improv, guitar and dance let kids explore their artistic leanings. Its outdoor programs teach survival skills, geocaching and environmental sciences. Sports are also a big part of camp activities.

Like most camps, Wannakumbac asks kids to surrender their phones upon arrival. Janet believes that the technology detox kids experience at camp is becoming one of the most valuable aspects of attending.

"People started to see the value of our kids getting outside because the world of technology started to turn them into insiders," said Gusdal. "When you're here you can't have access to any of that. But they know it's our policy and they keep coming."

During their time away from parents, siblings, pets and friends at home, kids are undoubtedly pushed to grow in new ways, she said.

"Even the shyest homebodies end up meeting a new friend, or finding a counsellor that they look up to," said Gusdal.

The camp also employs a character-building system that requires kids to complete daily tasks such as sweeping the dining hall and cleaning their cabin, which earn them various awards.

"So they get home and say 'I need to make my bed today and

line up my shoes,'" said Gusdal. "Just those little chores that some kids haven't had at home, it gives them a couple skills that they didn't have before coming to camp. On our parent evaluations, parents will say 'I don't even recognize this kid. They clear the table without me even asking.'"

Gusdal said the night sky is another thing campers enjoy. Often, the first thing they notice is how dark the skies are, and just how many stars are really up there.

CAMP CONNECTIONS

All in all, the camp's attractions mean that even 15 and 16-year-old boys still want to come back, when generally boys that age are too "cool" for such things, said Gusdal.

"For the boys that have been coming to camp since they were eight or nine, their parents will say 'there's nothing I can do to stop them from coming to camp.' When they apply for their summer jobs they'll say, 'I'll work for you, but I need this week off for camp.' That warms my heart."

Not only are life-long friendships often forged at Camp Wannakumbac, Gusdal said many people have met their partners and spouses there, too.

"During the annual Family Camp during August long weekend, we always do a 'raise your hand if you met at camp,'" she said. "A good quarter out of those 200 people met here and they're still coming back."

Gusdal said that young adults who may not have yet found their place in life also reap valuable benefits by working as camp counsellors. After a stint — or three — at Wannakumbac, many have gone on to become very successful.

"They end up becoming these wonderful people that are either very committed to the farming community, or go on to be architects or doctors, and yet come back to volunteer for us when we need medical or other staff," said Gusdal.

"If you think about all the staff that have gone through here in the past 50 years, quite often they'll say to me, 'I'm who I am because of Camp Wannakumbac.' That always amazes me because we're always thinking about the campers, but I think what we also do is we make staff into great adults, too."

For more information, visit wannakumbac.com. **FV**



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