

Summer is over.. but memories .. AHHHH

Summer
From Don Morrison

As I look out over the lake - where, long ago, I bought a modest house - I see powerful motorboats dragging small children on water skis. Other kids are sailing, splashing and squealing just off my dock. I have never met any of these intruders, but I know them all too well.

You see, I share my lake with a big, noisy summer camp. Two in fact, plus two more just over the hill. Most of the year, they sit silently. But for eight or nine weeks every summer, they -- and their hundreds of young residents -- are the neighbors from hell.

Or heaven, depending on whether you too have attended summer camp. I didn't. Too expensive. Too far away. I hung out with the neighborhood kids, cut the grass, watched TV.

I turned out fine, but sometimes I wonder. Over the years, I have run into lots of ex-campers. A disproportionate number are gregarious, self-assured, empathetic and savvy in the lore of nature - even the bookish ones. Does summer camp, as its alumni often insist, make you a better person?

That was the plan when summer camps got their start in the 1880s. Blame Henry David Thoreau and a generation of 19th century thinkers intoxicated with the nobility and healing power of nature. They were joined by religious leaders and social reformers eager to get kids out of the fetid, corrupting cities for a few weeks of exercise, contemplation and fresh air.

Thus began the peculiarly American custom of exiling innocent children to the deep woods, where they are forced to confront their fear of being eaten by a bear and meanwhile learn self-reliance, teamwork, leadership, patriotism, archery and silly songs.

That formula has worked well. Today, America's 15,000 overnight and day camps welcome upwards of 20 million young people every summer, according to the 112-year-old American Camp Association. The industry employs nearly 2 million Americans every summer and grosses at least \$15 billion.

Summer camp is, surely, one of my town's biggest industries. Oldest as well. The four camps within a bugle call of my bedroom were founded, respectively, in 1903, 1916, 1932 and 1937. Covid hit them all hard but, judging from the noise level, they've mostly recovered.

Indeed, the entire sector seems to be booming. A new generation of parents is eager to keep their kids away from electronic devices and social media during the summer. Specialty camps - for music, art, soccer, baseball, history, weight-loss, computer coding - are proliferating. Even traditional camps are diversifying their offerings. The kids on my lake are learning how to master those trendy stand-up paddle boards.

But one of the enduring appeals, to parents at least, is that summer camp builds character. There is a surprising amount of research into that question. In 2008, University of New Hampshire psychologist James T. Neill examined 244 such studies. He found that most campers showed gains in leadership, self-understanding and interpersonal skills. The improvements appeared to endure well after the subjects went home.

I sent my kids to summer camp - a rigorous, outdoorsy place in Maine. Cost a fortune. But they loved it, and they've grown into fine young men without a single felony conviction among them.

My grandchildren, too, went to camp -- the older kid to one of the places just over the hill from us. Their dad, recalling his own first-day terror, drove there via the most circuitous route possible, lest the boy realize he could walk to our house if he wanted. When they arrived, my clever grandson took one look at the hill and said, "Wow, I could be at Grandma's in 10 minutes." He never felt the need.

This summer, alas, the grandkids are missing camp because of schedule conflicts. Happily, they arrive at the lake today to spend a couple of weeks with Grandma and me.

I've got the tents and kayaks ready, the hikes mapped out, the arts and crafts supplies stockpiled. Even the marshmallows for the campfire. I have no idea if they'll enjoy this pale imitation of the camping experience, much less show enduring moral and behavioral improvement from it.

But I do know this: I'm going to have the summer of my life. I suspect it will make me a better person.

Donald Morrison is an Eagle columnist and co-chairman of the advisory board. The opinions expressed by columnists do not necessarily reflect the views of The Berkshire Eagle.