

# Summer Camps: The White Mountains Roots of an Iconic American Experience

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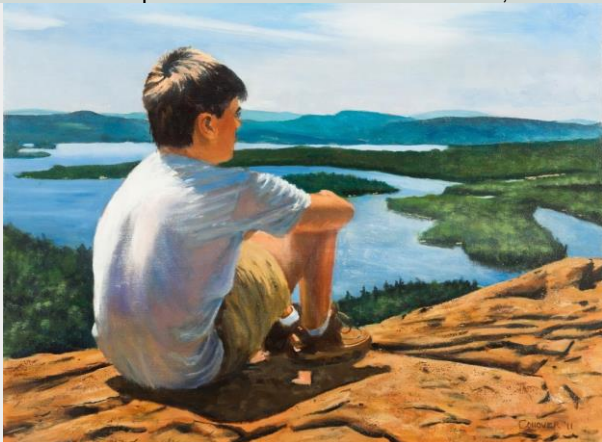


Photo courtesy of Camp Hale.

In the summer of 1949, a 12-year-old boy named Frank boarded a steam engine train heading towards Bretton Woods, NH. He was on his way to Caddy Camp.

Frank and his classmates would spend the summer making friends, getting into trouble and working as golf caddies at the Mount Washington Hotel. Frank Sonny Piazza is 80 years old now, but the memories of the good times at Caddy Camp have stuck with him.

Frank's story is one of dozens that are featured in the new exhibit at the Museum of the White Mountains. The exhibit is called Summer Camps: The White Mountain Roots of an Iconic American Experience. It opens May 3, with an opening reception from 4 to 6 p.m. It celebrates the many summer camps located in the White Mountains, and the impact they have on young lives.



"Next Generation" by Woolsey S. Conover. Oil on canvas.

John Anderson photo. Courtesy of the artist.

The exhibit features a mix of paintings, images, artifacts and stories from the 1880s to present. The museum partnered with 16 summer camps located in the White Mountains, who lent the museum clothing, banners, pennants and historical brochures.

Walking into the museum feels like walking outdoors. A green canoe hangs from the ceiling. The interactive White Mountain Studio is set up like a wooden cabin, where visitors can write their names on the walls, similar to the tradition of carving names into walls and bedposts at camp. The downstairs open lab will be set up like a craft cabin.

Visitors can immerse themselves in the stories through tablets, which contain audio recordings of adults reflecting on their summer camp experiences. The camp stories are accompanied by digital slideshows. People can pick up the tablets and listen to the stories while they wander around the exhibit.

“Listening to those stories myself, I was so taken with how important or often pivotal the summer camp experience was for so many people,” said co-curator Cynthia Robinson.

The recordings will be a valuable tool for students, researchers and camp enthusiasts in the future.

Some of the featured camps are no longer in existence, and some still support a vibrant community of campers over one hundred years after they were established.



Race Team. Photograph courtesy of Camp Mowglis.

Boston University professor Paul Hutchinson is the lead historical consultant, and co-curator of the exhibit. He was writing his dissertation on the 19th century roots of the outdoor education movement when he first heard about the museum on New Hampshire Public Radio. Hutchinson sent an email to the museum director at the time. Almost four years later, the exhibit has come to fruition.

Hutchinson, an Eagle Scout himself, said that camps offer a unique perspective on American culture. When studying education, “you see what people think is the most important values that our kids need to have for the future.” Most camps are small, and they are not constrained by the standards of public schools. “It’s a more diverse story,” he said.

Summer camps have their roots in the White Mountains. “The first summer camp, really in the world, was on Squam Lake,” said Hutchinson. The camp, called Camp Chocorua, began in 1881. New Hampshire is also home to the first girl’s camp, which took place on Newfound Lake. Camps then spread throughout New England, and through the rest of the U.S.

Resort hotels are one reason why camps sprung up in New Hampshire. Tourism brought wealthy people into the White Mountains, trying to escape the heat of the city. Camp directors advertised to resort patrons, ensuring a group of kids every summer.

Camps are not only for the wealthy. Soon, camps like Scouting and the YMCA emerged, targeting middle- class families. Other camps served at-risk children in the inner city.

The New Hampshire Historical Society tried to count all of the camps in New Hampshire. They gave up at 460. Hutchinson said that many camps were simply a group of 20 or so parents getting together. “There’s no real footprint of camps like that,” he said.

Art and literature play a role in the roots of summer camps, which Hutchinson elaborates on in the museum's catalogue. Nineteenth-century artists and authors including transcendentalists, romanticists and books such as Rudyard Kipling’s “The Jungle Book” changed the way people viewed the land.

“Summer camps were built around those ideas,” said Hutchinson. “It was a way to make these experiences livable.”

A delicate section of the exhibit explores the camps’ relationship with Native Americans. Many of the camps have Native American or Native American-sounding names, and adopt what they saw as Native American traditions. Although this was considered cutting-edge cultural knowledge at the time, many of these practices would be blatantly racist today.

People return to summer camps year after year, often spanning generations. Hutchinson’s neighbor attended the same camp as his father and grandfather. Now the son is going to the same camp. “There’s not a lot in American culture that has that level of tradition and sanctity to it,” Hutchinson said.

This type of tradition encourages a relationship with the land and stewardship of the environment. “If you spoil the landscape, you’re going to see it,” Hutchinson said. “In that pristine area, you’re going to see the consequences of your actions.”

Camp is often a kid’s first experience away from home. They have to make their beds, take care of personal hygiene, and learn to live independently. They spend time with young people and make lifetime friendships.

“I think what camp does, is it provides a space for children to find themselves,” said Hutchinson. “They’re a part of the community. And it’s a community that they made.”

The Museum of the White Mountains is located at 17 High Street. Summer Camps: The White Mountains Roots of an Iconic American Experience will be on display until September 13.