



# Leading the Way

*Vermont's earliest summer camps for children were the beginning of America's summer camp movement.*

**A**S VERMONT'S TREASURED SUMMER MONTHS unfold, untold numbers of children pack their bags with shorts, T-shirts, bug spray, swimsuits, and a fa-



Dr. and Mrs. Henry Sleeper, directors of Camp Marbury, posing in their Sunday whites in 1926.

vorite book. Summer camps for children open their cabins in the mountains, on the lakes, and in the fields as they have done for more than 100 years. Vermont, like its northeast neighbors, was at the forefront of the summer camp movement as far back as the 1880s. By the end of the 19th century, Americans came to view childhood as a distinct period of life, a time of personal growth, socialization, and moral impression. Families of means, often residing in cities, drew on Victorian convictions of nature's physical and moral benefits to send their children, often young boys, to small private camps in the woods of the Adirondacks and New England. Here, the young men could escape the temptations of city life, the "feminization" of the home, and explore masculinity lost in modern life.

By the turn of the century a camp-building boom was in full swing, and Vermont was right in the middle of it. Social organization-sponsored camps such as the YMCA's Camp Dudley and Camp Abnaki catering to the urban poor soon joined private camps for elite young men, such as Keewaydin and Campanoosuc. Although every lake, pond, and stream seemed to have a camp cropping up, there was little opportunity for young women. Camp programs of the time leaned heavily on military-style schedule, discipline, and survivalist training as evidenced by the newly formed Boy Scouts of America. However, with a growing higher education program for women and a seething suffrage movement, it wasn't long before camps specifically designed for young women started to pop up.

Vermont led the way in camps for young women. Fifteen years ahead of the founding of most girls camps, Harriet and Edward Gulick founded the Aloha Camp for girls in 1905. This innovative camp in Fairlee pioneered a program of outdoor living, sport, craft, and social engagement for girls that





Girls line up for archery practice in this 1933 promotional photograph. Horseback riding was introduced at Camp Marbury in the mid-1920s; equestrian training was fairly commonplace at private girls' camps.



would become the training ground and model for camp owners and directors in years to come. Drawing their instructors and counselors from the faculty and staff of elite women's colleges, these early girls camps benefited from the most current, progressive, educational thought and helped redefine the modern young lady.

After spending numerous summers at Aloha Camp, Professor Henry Sleeper of Smith College, his wife Mary, Professor Hugh Worthington of Sweet Briar College, and his wife Helen purchased property near the Basin Harbor Resort in Ferrisburgh to open their own camp for girls. Built on Mile Point Road near the present-day location of Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, Camp Marbury opened in 1921 with these encouraging words from the Gulicks at Aloha Camps: "Our heartiest good wishes to you, Camp Marbury! Success and prosperity is assuredly yours, our youngest Aloha child. Long may you live to bless American girls!"

The camp was named for Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643) of Massachusetts Bay Colony fame, who, according to the script for Henry Sleeper's pageant celebrating the camp's 10th anniversary, "...is admired because of her ability

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Like camps for both boys and girls throughout the country at the time, campers stayed in canvas tents built on wooden platforms. By the middle of the 1930s, Camp Marbury started to add cabins for its younger campers.



In addition to crafts, instruction in fine art set the programs of girls' camps apart from those of their male counterparts.



Girls playing basketball at Camp Marbury in 1921 or 1922. Notice the dark bloomers, a uniform requirement for much of the 1920s.



Young campers with their counselor in 1933. By the 1930s, camps started using the unit plan, which segregated girls based on age into specific camp areas and schedule.

and energy, her kindness to children, her interest in the welfare of women, her loyalty to truth as she saw it and her fearlessness in the presence of danger." The Sleepers and Worthingtons stated clearly in the first camp brochure their aim for the camp. This statement epitomizes the guiding principles of girls camps throughout much of the first half of the 20th century.

*The directors aim to give the girls the best of good times, to let them experience the novelty and delight of mountain climbing and camping out, under competent leadership to develop their skill and eagerness in games and sports, to teach them self-reliance in and on the water, and to surround them with influences that will encourage appreciation of music, poetry, and nature. The days of the summer will pass all too quickly, but the end of the season should find the girls not only richer through warm friendships, formed among carefully chosen companions, but with greater physical vigor, and a deepened sense of the finer values in life.*

Camp fees per child that first year totaled \$300 for the whole

summer—the equivalent of \$4,000 today, comparable to most current sleep-away camps. Girls enjoyed swimming, diving, canoeing, boating, tennis, basketball, hiking, music, theatre, and jewelry making. The girls also took several field trips up and down the lake aboard steamships that stopped at Basin Harbor Resort, including the *Ticonderoga*, now on display at the Shelburne Museum.

Reflecting the longstanding belief that nature enhances religious feeling, most camps, religiously based or not, included some sort of chapel service on Sundays, followed by specific spiritual activities. Camp Marbury was no different, such that their required costume for campers included "one or two pairs of white bloomers for Sunday" (green bloomers were required for the rest of the week). Sundays at Camp Marbury often included musical performances, dance, and theatre.

In 1922, the Worthingtons left to start their own camp for girls in West Virginia and the Sleepers brought their son and

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Campers often took field trips to historic sites, villages, and mountains. In this 1922 snapshot, the girls are photographed atop Camel's Hump with all of their hiking and overnight gear. Notice the large bed rolls, hiking boots, and camera.

two daughters into the management of the camp. Throughout the 1920s and '30s, the infrastructure of the camp grew with the addition of cabins, recreation halls, riding stables, craft buildings, and various boats. Camp Marbury, like other camps throughout the United States, took advantage of the growing field of professional camp directors and planners. Child psychologists promoted the unit plan that led to specific age groups of children living in certain areas of camp with age-appropriate schedules and activities, while the American Red Cross formalized swim training, waterfront design, and water safety. Individuals trained through the National Park Service during the New Deal, which brought their camp planning and building expertise to the growing industry.

Camp Marbury continued to operate with great success until 1943 when war rationing and the retirement of the camp directors resulted in its closure. By this point Camp Marbury was no longer one of a few, but one of many camps throughout Vermont and the country that offered summer enjoyment to young women. Girl Scouts, YWCA, church groups, and private camps provided hundreds of options for girls of all ages and economic ability to take part in summer activities. In Vermont, Aloha Camps, Camp Kiniya, and Brownledge—all still in existence today—were just a few of the seasonal camps operating specifically for girls.

Today the trend of sleep-away camp for children is declining relative to population, but many camps still flourish and welcome kids in much the same way they did 75 years ago. The Gulicks, Worthingtons, and Sleepers were certainly all onto something when they espoused the impact of Vermont's clean air, clear water, and quiet forests on the growth and development of a well-rounded child. ▽

Stephen Perkins is the executive director of the Vermont Historical Society.