

Return to YWCA Camp Maqua: women celebrate centennial

by Karen Rouse

HALE — Summertime calls to mind days which seemed to have lasted forever, spending time with friends and family or in blissful solitude, on land and on the water in northeast Michigan.

For some who would spend a week or more at summer camps, recollections of fun and adventure stretch long in their memories, with many wishing they could experience it, “just one more time.”

Sitting around a campfire roasting marshmallows, telling tales of staying in primitive cabins and sharing discoveries. Exploring forested paths and canoeing on a lake. Learning to ride a horse and shooting a rifle. Dining hall games and meals. Sandy beaches and sunning on boat docks.

For a lucky group of women, they were able to go back to the place where friendships were forged and memories made. From near and far, they journeyed to property formerly occupied by YWCA Camp Maqua, nestled on the sun-dappled hills of the southwestern shore of Loon Lake in Hale.

The purpose of the gathering was a centennial celebration of the YWCA camp, with a reunion of campers and staff, which was held on June 25.

Camp Maqua has been closed since 1978, divided in to 10 privately owned parcels where multiple owners have all contributed to preserving the camp.

Buildings, original to the camp, remain on common property of the Maqua Association and include the former craft hut, boathouse, fire pit, camp bathroom and hiking trails.

The original farmhouse called Dutton was falling down and was replaced with a new log home. The old tennis court and corral still stand. Hut one is now a guest house for the owners of the lodge and is used extensively during the summer. Occasionally, the soft woods are timbered to provide monies to keep the roads and outbuildings in good shape.



GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN — Nancy Michelson Larbi from Missouri inspects the names on the ceilings and walls of past campers in a cabin which still exists on property which was once part of YWCA Camp Maqua. Names were written with lipstick or toothpaste most of the time.

Kathryn Baker, host of the reunion and Camp Maqua historian, her husband Bill, with the Starks, Bill's aunt and uncle, purchased the camp's main lodge in 1987, along with 14 acres of the former camp property.

Baker said when women at the reunion saw the little tables and bootstrap benches still sitting inside the lodge, they couldn't help but smile. She was told that it made their hearts happy to see the pride residents have in the history of the camp and

how they have preserved the natural feel and spirit of the place.

Approximately 75 individuals attended the reunion, consisting of former campers, counselors, current property owners and even the last camp doctor.

It was indeed a trip back in time for many.

A meet and greet kicked-off the event, followed by boat rides on the lake and tours of camp buildings which have stood through time.

A barbecue was held in the evening, followed by a campfire and sing-a-long, where Baker said that the women sang out loud like little girls.

“Song leader Shelley Harris knew the lyrics to all the songs and led the women into many old rounds, hand gestured songs and ballads from the sixties. The girls would spontaneously break out into songs during dinner, hikes and the campfire,” Baker described, adding how much fun it was for her to watch them recreate their camping experiences.

Approximately 40 former campers from the 1930s through the 1970s were at

the reunion. Baker said the earliest camper who attended was Jean Meisel of



REMINISCING — Kaye Webb Belleville of Hale, a former Camp Maqua horseback riding instructor in the 1940s/50s, sits with Jean Meisel of Michigan, a camper from the early 1930s, during the reunion.

Michigan who was a camper at Maqua in the early 1930s. Meisel was accompanied by her daughter, Ann, who had also been a Maqua girl.

Kaye Webb Belleville of Hale was at the reunion, and had been a horseback riding instructor at the camp in the 1940s. Sascha “Marsha” Im-

merman of Colorado, a long-time friend of Belleville's, also took time to attend the reunion.

Another former camper, Patricia Purcell Schmidt, also attended, and “has a beautiful cabin on Loon Lake,” said Baker, adding that Sheryl Biesman and Michele Patterson, as well, flew in from California to see the camp one more time.

“They peeked into huts to see their names, climbed the new stairway to the coveted hut nine to look at the view they may or not have seen when they were little girls. It has the best view, overlooking the lake,” Baker said of the hut, which was built on top of the boat house.

During their camp experience, girls had canoed, kayaked and swam in Loon Lake but had not been on a pontoon ride around the lake, so four boats rotated as nearly all of the attendees cruised and were on the lookout for the resident loon family, which were found, said Baker.

An owner of one of the boats, William McCadie, was the last camp doctor and lives on Loon Lake, Baker pointed out.

“I think what impressed the many women who had not been back since the sixties and seventies was how small everything seemed to them now and how well the present owners have maintained the integrity of the property,” Baker observed.

The YWCA camp began operations in 1916, located in a small beach town near Bay City. In time, facilities in Bay City were too limited for the number of girls who wanted to participate in a camp program, so property on Loon Lake was selected and pur-



CAMPFIRE — A fire pit on the beach of Loon Lake in Hale serves once again as the focal point of a sing-a-long by women who had spent summers at Camp Maqua, during a reunion held on June 25.

chased in October 1924. It was dedicated as Camp Maqua on May 11, 1925. Maqua is a Native American word meaning “the birches,” which grew abundantly on the property.

In 1976, Camp Maqua merged with a YMCA camp named Camp Iroquois, lo-

cated on Sand Lake, and became a coed camp for most of the season.

“The experiment was not a success and Camp Maqua closed its doors in 1978,” said Baker.

During the course of interviewing 280 men and women about their experiences for a historical book she wrote about Maqua, Baker said that the stories from that particular era were less than wonderful, as the girls hated the boys moving

in. They felt they had to wear makeup, bras and act differently.

Baker said many of the women who attended camp were from a long line of family members who either worked at the YWCA, served on the camp committee or attended themselves.

“It served as a wonderful feeder for the numbers who attended, but those numbers began to dwindle in the years before camp finally closed. Many believe it was

due to the increased interest of families taking vacations instead of sending their kids off to camp,” said Baker.

Baker, who began chronicling the history of the camp since her family purchased property, finished a pictorial history of the camp in a book simply titled, “Camp Maqua,” published in late 2015.

She interviewed hundreds of campers and scoured archival ledgers, camp committee minutes, director’s reports, newspaper clippings and photographs from the vaults of the Great Lakes Bay Region YWCA.

Photos and captions in the 128-page book are of girls being themselves, which differ only with clothing and hair styles giving away the years. Photo archives show fads which have come and gone, but reveal that the spirit of the girls at camp did not change with passing of time.

The book, published by Arcadia Publishing in its *Images of America* collection, is available for \$21.99 from Baker at walkbake@gmail.com, Hale Pharmacy and

Amazon.com.

Baker said when a book is purchased directly from her, she will donate a portion from the sale to the YWCA.

The book outlines a day at camp, from the time the bus left the YWCA, to the buildings that were on the property (many built by the Aladdin Company of Bay City) to the activities and traditions.

A blog, www.girlsofcamp-maqua.com, takes the history into much more depth, including why the girls attended camp, what their feelings were going to camp, their relationships, accidents and calamities of camp life and responsibilities as they moved up into staff positions.

“I think I have seven blogs on homesickness,” said Baker.

Keeping memories alive

and connecting campers to each other is a Camp Maqua Alumni page on Facebook. A post by Deb Wilkinson-Dingman sums up her experience:

“A very big thank you to Kathryn Walker Baker, her husband, Bill and all the neighbors at Camp Maqua for opening up their homes and the wonderful hospitality that they gave to all the alumni campers who showed up for the 100th anniversary of Camp Maqua.

“Wonderful memories were made. Awesome time spent for just a few hours ... The former campers, counselors came near and far for a short but truly a memorable journey from a time that was so magical, each camper didn’t want it to end ... Happy 100th Birthday Camp Maqua YWCA!”



Courtesy photo

REMEMBER THIS? – Sheryl Biesman, left, and Michele Patterson, both of California, look at an old photo album from Camp Maqua.



Courtesy photo

MAQUA GIRLS – Jan Bateson Curtice, left, of Michigan, and Sascha Immerman of Colorado at the Camp Maqua centennial on June 25.



Courtesy photo

DAY IS DONE – Half of a group of 40 former Camp Maqua campers who stayed for the bonfire and singing during the reunion held on the former camp property at Loon Lake last month.



Courtesy photo

BACK AT CAMP – Deb Wilkinson-Dingman, left, and Kelly Higgs, both Michigan residents, at the 100th Anniversary Camp Maqua reunion.



Courtesy photo

PICTORIAL HISTORY – Debbie Robson Milkowski of North Carolina reads the “Camp Maqua” book at the campfire during the reunion. The book is available for purchase at walkbake@gmail.com, Hale Pharmacy and Amazon.com for \$21.99.