

## West Kerr Current • 107-A Hwy. 39 • Ingram • TX

### Summer camp history stretches back 87 years, and still thriving



Although no longer in existence, Camp Wabun-Annung for girls, established by Marcelline and Cilton DeBellevue in 1926, was one of a long line of early privately-owned youth camps in the Hill Country. It provided young ladies of the day outdoor sports and indoor activities. The first camp founded here was Camp Rio Vista, opened just upriver from Ingram in 1921 by Herbert Crate as a "Summer Character Camp for Boys." It is still in operation.

**By Irene Van Winkle of the West Kerr Current**

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The Hill Country has long been renowned for its clean air and water, where people with lung illness came to recuperate. Eventually, the summer season also began to attract outdoor activities for kids from cities all across Texas and, indeed, the country.

Most local youth camps were built on the north and south forks of the Guadalupe River, although others also sprouted in the Turtle Creek area. The industry traces its history back to the 1920s.

The earliest camps included Camp Rio Vista for Boys, established in 1921, and, 83 years later, claims the title as the oldest private summer camp in the southwest (although it skipped a few years early on).

Soon on its heels, though, it was followed by Camp Stewart in 1924. Then came the girls camps, Mystic (first called Camp Stewart) and Waldemar, both founded in 1926, along with Camp Wabun Annung, which was the precursor to the present-day Lutheran Camp Chrysalis and Kickapoo Kamp. Camp La Junta followed in 1928.

The list grew (not necessarily in chronological order) with the passing years: Heart 'O the Hills, Camp Arrowhead, Camp Lone Star for Boys, Camp Flaming Arrow, Camp Arrowhead, Loma Linda Girls Camp (now at Mo-Ranch), Camp Sierra Vista for Girls, C.A.M.P. Camp, and Camp Honey Creek — most of which still exist today.

It is interesting, too, how the histories of several of these camps are intertwined, as owners either changed, crossed over or expanded their operations.

In the Kerr County Album, published in 1986, Silas B. (II) and Kathy Ragsdale's daughter, Jane, wrote about how many of the camps began, and Si himself has quite a few recollections, starting from when he first came to camp at age 10.

In 1921, Herbert Crate opened Camp Rio Vista, a short jaunt past the town of Ingram. He drew his experience from years as the chief executive officer of the YMCA in Houston, an organization which had founded the first youth camps on the east coast.

Si said that although plenty of Crate's acquaintances had said they would send their kids, his projections were overly optimistic. Crate based his attendance on the saying, "Never start a camp from scratch," but despite promises from parents that at least 100 youngsters would arrive for Rio Vista's first season, his crop consisted of 16 boys and 21 counselors.

Founding Rio Vista as "Summer Character Camp for Boys," Crate explained that "the process of character-building is of course entirely intangible and can be measured only in the afterlife of the boy himself," Jane said.

The boys were rigorously screened for individual needs by counselors, many who were professors from Rice University, who recorded campers' weights, and regulated their dietetic and exercise regimens.

Because the roads into Kerrville were so bad, Herbert enlisted two brothers, Harry "Pappy" and Jimmy, to build a lodge for parents nearby, across Kelly Creek (now accessed at the Waltonia Crossing). Rio Vista Lodge opened in 1924 and operated for 35 years. Pappy's wife ran the kitchen, and meals were served in the dining room.

Si remembered attending Rio Vista Camp when he was a boy of 10 years old.

Several harsh, inescapable events spelled a changing of the guard. The 1932 flood devastated many camps, and at Rio Vista, it washed away all the cabins; then the Great Depression hit hard in 1935; and finally, a divorce in the family nailed their fate.

The Crates bowed out, and under the direction of Rio Vista's new owners, George and Houston-bred Mimi Broun, it eventually reopened in 1940, refurbished and improved. Mimi's father was the largest Cadillac distributor in the southwest, while George, who graduated from UT, roomed with future Texas Governor Buford H. Jester.

Once George passed away, Bill Stacy, II (later Kerr County Judge), became its director. His background as a UT graduate with a degree in Business Administration came in handy. His whole family became involved with the camp, including Bill's wife (and George and Mimi's daughter), Gretchen, and children Bill, George, Cynthia and Philip.

Also on staff in later years was Baylor grad Jack Price, who coached for years at Waco schools, and became the camp's longtime office manager. The 50th

anniversary edition catalogue for Camp Rio Vista also lists a football great, Dallas Cowboy Roger Staubach, who was the camp's athletic director. Philip Stacy added that another, more local legend — Hondo Crouch — who was a swimming star in college, also came on board.

Si fondly recalled E.J. "Doc" Stewart, who founded three camps here, the first bearing his own name.

"Doc Stewart was the head coach at UT at Austin for football and basketball," Si said. "Doc was a successful coach, and was quite an entrepreneur, and he moved here in 1924, at the edge of Kerrville near the old fairgrounds (near Five Points)."

Doc opened Heart of the Hills Inn in 1928 as a resort for camp parents to stay. By then, he had already opened two other camps: Camp Stewart for boys (1924) and Camp Mystic for girls (1926), but fate intervened suddenly. In 1932, Doc Stewart was killed in a hunting accident. Camp Stewart changed hands to "Uncle Bill" James and his wife, "Aunt Kate," who started buying it from Doc's widow, Si said.

"Uncle Bill was Doc's right-hand man at UT, who moved here in 1926," Si said. "When he was a lineman, he only weighed about 130-140 pounds. He was from near Ft. Worth, but went to college in another state (Centre College in Kentucky). His team, the 'Praying Colonels,' was the first southern school to upset a top team in the East. In those days, Ivy League schools like Harvard and Yale were the powerhouses."

Numerous sources confirm that in 1921, Centre upset Harvard University's undefeated football team 6-0 which The New York Times later called 'Football's Upset of the Century.'

After serving in WWII, marrying, and settling down, Si said that while in Denton, Texas, where he was the chamber of commerce business manager, he ran into Doris Johnson from Camp Waldemar and Dick Eastland's wife, Ellen.

"Dora said, 'I remember you, Si,'" he said. "We miss you in camping.' I told her I missed it, too. She told me I should get back into it, but I said 'How can I get in without being married into it?' She look at me for about three long minutes and said, "You need to go talk to Uncle Bill.'"

Si managed to strike a deal with Uncle Bill in 1966. In 1983, sister camp Rio Vista for Girls opened up and operated nearby. Si and wife Kathy, and their four children (Jon, Jane, Juli and Jeeper) are still deeply involved in it.

On the heels of Camp Stewart came Camp Stewart for Girls in 1926, renamed Mystic the following year. Spread out over 1,800 acres, Mystic housed about 108 campers in 18 cypress log cabins. After Doc's death, his widow continued operating Camps Mystic and Heart O' the Hills, but the 1932 flood also led to a change.

In 1939, "Pop" Gillespie and Agnes "Ag" Doran Stacy purchased the camp, along with Ben Powell. After Pop died in 1941, Ag kept the camp running, except between 1943-45, when it became a federal rehabilitation and recovery camp for U.S. Army Air Corps WWII veterans. In 1948, Iney and Frank Harrison bought the camp, and operated it until they retired in 1987.

Now, Camp Mystic is run by Dick and Tweety Eastland.

Heart 'O The Hills was purchased by Lake Robertson and his wife, spending their first summer in 1932. Lake, who was a builder and contractor, died in 1936, but his wife kept it going until the mid-1940s, then moved to San Antonio. The Inn was bought by Col. Harold Byrd and Kenneth Jones. For entertainment, the guests rode horseback, played tennis, enjoyed swimming and boating, and picnicked at Criders.

The Jones' had a major problem when the main lodge burned in late 1948, but it was rebuilt and reopened by the following May. The Jones' had two daughters, Jan and Jo, who attended Camp Mystic, but sadly, Jo died in a traffic accident. She had urged her parents to turn Heart O' the Hills into a camp, which they did in 1953, in her memory.

In 1965, it was sold to Carl Hawkins, and by 1976, to two other couples — Si and Kathy Ragsdale and Whayne and Bobbi Moore.

Massive flooding in the summer of 1978 interrupted the season, and although there was severe damage, no lives at the camp were lost. Jane Ragsdale noted that a symbolic Ark was built out of cypress pillars and a pebble base to commemorate the deluge. Now, the camp also is used off-season for conferences and retreats.

Camp Waldemar, translated "Sea of Woods," was opened on the North Fork of the Guadalupe River in 1926 by Ora Johnson (then principal of Brackenridge High School in San Antonio), and which she later purchased. She hired German rock mason Ferdinand Rehbecker to build its solid stone and cedar structures. After Ora's death in 1931, her brothers, took over briefly, and then her niece, Doris, assumed the reins from 1934 until 1978.

In 1937, Connie Reeves joined the staff. She was the greatest asset to the camp's horseback riding program, and became a legend in her own right. Reeves eventually was inducted into the Cowgirl's Hall of Fame, and died in 2003 at nearly 101 years of age after a fall when her riding her horse, Dr. Pepper, who bucked her off. Camp owner and overall acting consultant, Marsha English Elmore, said she was present at the time, and will always mourn her loss.

"We thought she'd live forever," Marsha said. "She was smart and alert, and didn't have anything wrong with her."

Marsha and her husband, Dean, bought Waldemar in late 1978, and she was director until 1998. Now, their daughter, Meg Elmore Clark, is camp director, and their son, Teak, is its business manager. Marsha said the camp's best asset is her people.

"It's our senior staff of women who have come back for 50-plus years," she said. "The base of their experience is about 600 years. I feel that lends itself to the strength of tradition and integrity in the way we do things: all these good minds and talents. We really hire for skill level, and maturity, and we have about a 3-1 ratio of staff to camper.

"When they developed Waldemar, it was so successful that we haven't changed it much. Of course, we've made improvements and tried to stay with the times, but it's wonderful that parents and mothers want to send their daughters. We have a 10-year waiting list for about 1,000 campers. That speaks for itself — that what we

teach is well accepted.”

Marsha admitted though, that it takes a lot of work. At Waldemar, like all Hill Country camps, they try to keep a high value system.

“With today’s morals, you have to know how to handle the girls,” she said. “Peer pressure here is, to be good. They’re all in tribes, and they don’t want to disappoint their tribe. Each tribe has about 103 girls, and it’s really easy to keep discipline because they regulate each other. It’s wonderful leverage.”

Although Camp Wabun Annung (translated from Ojibway as “Morning Star”) for girls at Turtle Creek no longer exists, it was in that crop of 1926 camps, and still echoes in its descendants, Camp Chrysalis and nearby Kickapoo Kamp.

Marcelline and Cilton DeBellevue, grandparents of Kerrville artist Copper Love, opened the camp, which featured plenty of outdoor activities for young ladies of the day. Their daughter (Copper’s mother) Isadora Marcelline “Dodie” DeBellevue, said in an interview she gave before her death in 2005 (at age 90) that although the camp was very popular, the Great Depression caused attendance to plunge from 100 campers in 1929, to a mere 25 in 1930.

Although Dodie’s parents parted ways within a few years, Marcelline kept the camp operating, taking in for a partner Frances Alexander, a member of Dallas’ well-heeled Neiman-Marcus family, who finally bought it. Marcelline bought the row of buildings on Water Street owned by the City of Kerrville between Butt-Holdsworth Library and the Kerr Regional History Center. Camp Wabun Annung went on to become Camp Chrysalis, a Lutheran camp.

Though it claims to be the oldest girl’s camp in the Hill Country, technically, Kamp Kickapoo did not arrive in the Hill Country itself until nearly two decades later. Established in 1925 in Monterey, Ark. by Charles L. “Chief” and Budgie Buris Ford, it soon moved to the Ozark Mountains in Hollister, Mo., then to Branson, then to Las Vegas, and Rosiada, New Mexico, and then to Estes Park, Colo. before WWII. Finally, because the war kept railroads from bringing campers in, their last move came to Texas and the Turtle Creek area.

Kickapoo is presently on land once owned by Judge Clabaugh, which the Fords purchased in 1944. The camp was completed in 1948 on plans by architect George Dahl, building cabins high above Turtle and Bushwhack creeks to minimize danger from flooding, and opened the following year.

There are also other camps with different slants including the Y.O. Ranch’s Adventure Camp on the Divide. And, in addition to private camps, there are Boy Scout facilities, such as the now-gone Indian Creek Camp in Ingram, and later, Bear Creek Scout Camp, which is still in operation.

On Hwy. 27 East, the non-profit Texas Lions Camp for Crippled Children opened in 1953. It accommodates children with various physical disabilities such as cancer, diabetes and other special needs.

Summing up for all area camps, Marsha said that one of her patrons from Dallas, remarked to her: “At Waldemar, good is good, and bad is bad — and the difference is very clear.”