

Camp NeekauNis Meeting Place of Friends

By Svetlana Sotiroff MacDonald

NeeKauNis, or Meeting place of friends comes from the Huron, who were the Native people of the region when the Europeans first settled the area. The camp was founded by Toronto Friends in 1932 to provide a place for inner city young people from Toronto to enjoy the outdoors, the company of others and, more importantly, time to commune with God and with nature.

In the early 1920s, Fred Haslam began looking for a piece of land north of Toronto and found the 10 acres on which the camp is presently situated. Fred, Albert Field and Harry Brandwood went to look over the site and found that it met their needs. Fred began negotiations to acquire the land and in 1931 it was bought

The camp remains a wonderful resource to Friends and a tribute to those whose foresight, planning and hard work have created this magic place.

from the Tanner family. In 1940 Fred Haslam purchased a small property adjacent to the camp, and upon his death it was bequeathed to Canadian Yearly Meeting so that it became part of the camp property which stretches from Highway 12 to the shore of Sturgeon Bay, an inlet of Georgian Bay.

The camp is situated at the top of the hill overlooking the bay. Here a large structure was built, housing the kitchen, dining hall and rooms to accommodate campers. It was eventually named Nelson-Hall in honour of Stirling and Mildred Nelson who led the camp for over 30 years. Almost all of the building and work at the camp have been done by campers on a volunteer basis. This includes Nelson-Hall which stands on large cement pillars which were poured by campers.

Young people travelled from Toronto for many camps which are described in numerous reports in *The Canadian Friend* among others. Violet Petrie recalled regular outings on the 24th of May when the young people would pack up in an open truck for a four-hour trip so that they could spend a day swimming and picnicking before travelling back to Toronto. These outings came to an abrupt end when regulations forbade the transportation of people in open trucks. Other programs included girls' camps, camps for mothers and their young children, as well as opportunities to study, work camps, refugee camps and, in more recent years, Carry On Discovery (COD) for retired folks who did not want to give up that wonderful camping opportunity.

From 1939-45, the camp was used infrequently. Stuart Starr, whose family has had a long association with the camp, recalls attending camp in 1941 as a long term camper and, being a farm boy accustomed to early rising, getting up before other campers and going to the water unsupervised, even though he was a non-swimmer. Following the war, repairs were urgently needed and in the summer of 1945 a work party of about 50 persons pitched in to repair the ravages of the intervening years. Stuart recalls a tree planting expedition in which he, with Maude and Fred Haslam and their nephew Brian Boughton, picked up trees at the Midhurst Forest Station and planted them beside the playing field and behind what is now the Meeting Centre.

Other work periods under the supervision of Stirling Nelson included clearing the beach of stones, the digging up of trees in the woods, transporting them to the top of the hill where they were planted, the construction of the back wall of the Meeting Centre and innumerable other projects including well construction, painting, repairing, clearing, cleaning, that is, both work that is visible and some not.

In looking at the history of the camp, it appears that it was easier to feed the camp in the early years, as milk was delivered daily, sometimes even twice daily. Groceries were also delivered daily, as was ice for the ice box although an electric refrigerator was also available from early on. Today, leaders must drive to stores to buy the supplies necessary to feed and operate a camp.

In 1957 when the camp celebrated its 25th year, Eileen Gardiner designed the crest which is associated with the camp. It shows white birches overlooking the bay, a scene which is familiar to campers who have sat in worship, watching sunsets or singing on the hill. First used that year on T-shirts, sweatshirts and cloth crests, it is seen in a large circular form hanging over the fireplace in Nelson-Hall and continues to appear on camp letterhead.

Nelson-Hall has always been the heart of the camp but another meeting place was clearly required. John Leaning was commissioned to design the new Meeting Centre and construction work started with the erection of the rear wall built of stones found on the property. At the 1967 work camp, which was devoted to that work, the children were asked to bring several stones up from the woods so that they could be added to the wall. An observant camper can see that there are a few smaller stones inserted just above the fireplace as a tribute to the little ones.

When Stirling and Mildred retired from the camp, they left its leadership in the devoted and hardworking hands of Jim and Bobi Adamson, who were ably assisted by Eric and Bonnie Hall. Many leaders have committed themselves over the years and cannot all be named.

Friends' niceness is appreciated by all who have the privilege of attending. From early morning to late at night, the camp is filled with good company, good food, lessons in living, humour, and the opportunity to live in community. An integral part of camp has always been a morning worship period and for many years, watching the sunset provided a restful and beautiful end to the day.

The camp remains a wonderful resource to Friends and a tribute to those whose foresight, planning and

hard work have created this magic place.

In the early 1980s the Camp NeeKauNis Committee asked Irene Sotiroff to prepare a history of the camp. She completed the first draft by the mid 1980s and left it with me, her daughter, to edit. A number of people have provided reminiscences. If anyone has information relating to the first 50 years, especially the early years, please forward them to me: Svetlana MacDonald, 61 Hunt Village Crescent, London, Ontario, N6H 4A2 for inclusion. ❣

Svetlana MacDonald is a member of Coldstream Monthly Meeting.

NeeKauNis Hymn

(sung to the tune of "The old rugged cross")

*On a hill far away, overlooking the bay
A part of the Georgian expanse
There's a view that is grand
Both of lake and of land
A scene which all souls must entrance.*

*So we'll go to this beautiful place
And together we'll dig up the sod
And we'll lay the foundation space
In the fear and the love of our God.*

*For it seemed a wise thing, our material to bring
And to build a fixed camp on this spot
Through the love of kind friends
Who subscribed to these ends
We've a structure adorning the spot/plot*

*Thus we build on the basis of love
For it stands when all others shall fall
And our unity came from above
When His image was found in us all.*

*(Composed in 1933 by William H. Willson
on the hill overlooking Georgian Bay.)*