

AN ACCOUNT OF THE EAGLE'S NEST CAMP

BY

Elizabeth Dickerson Palmer

Elizabeth Dickerson Palmer was the daughter of James Spencer Dickerson, one of the original colonists of the Eagle's Nest Camp. Mr. Dickerson originated the idea for the camp and made the contract between Mr. Heckman and the artists' group. The Dickerson children came to Eagle's Nest Camp first during the summer 1898, and spent all of their childhood summers here. Elizabeth Dickerson married Harry Palmer, who owned and operated a structural steel company in St. Paul, Minnesota. These memoirs were received in unpublished form from W.P. Dickerson, Mrs. Palmer's brother, who presently lives just a few miles north of the Field Campus on the Rock River. Mrs. Palmer died in 1952.

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The Beginning

It was in the year 1895 that a group of Chicago artists, looking for a place to take their families for the summer, found their problem solved by an invitation from a young Irish sculptor named Charles Mulligan. His wife's parents owned a farm by willow bordered Bass Lake, in Indiana. He suggested that his friends put up tents in the farm pasture, bring their wives and babies, and make a community thing of it. His invitation was accepted, and two happy summers were spent on the shores of Bass Lake. Then malaria appeared, and a new site had to be found.

The next spring (1898) Mr. James Spencer Dickerson introduced the young artists to his next-door neighbor, Mr. Wallace Heckman, who quickly understood their longing for a summer home, and generously offered them fifteen acres of woods on the bluff above the Rock River, near Oregon, Illinois, following the offer with an invitation to bring ten of the group out to spend a week-end at his country home.

I can still hear my mother's voice describing that memorable visit; Mr. Heckman at the station to meet them in his tallyho, the long drive through the dark woods, the sweet notes of the horn that echoed through the still night and brought Mrs. Heckman to the porch to welcome them; the walk in the moonlight to inspect the camp-site, the glimpses of the shimmering river far below. Here was peace and beauty, a simple life with small expense, and perfect conditions for work and rest. Mr. Heckman's invitation was accepted with delight and appreciations.

That summer the kitchen was built--a low-lying building set close to the earth on the edge of the bluff, a tent fly stretched between trees, a table and benches set up, and a row of tents pitched. The women did the housekeeping; Mary, assisted by her small daughter Olli Boga, did the cooking; and Eagle's Nest Camp began the first of its forty-three summers.

After three summers of picking the bees and yellow-jackets out of our food, of huddling under the tent fly for meals in the rain, of crowding into the tiny kitchen when a storm swept down the valley, it was decided that a more adequate dining room and kitchen were needed; and in 1902 the building know as the camp house was completed. It was built out of native stone, and dedicated at a gay party. All the campers and their guests came to supper in fancy costumes. The big room glowed with candle-light and fire-light as the procession wound in and out the doors and round and round the tables. There were shouts of laughter when Mr. Clarkson led a cakewalk, when Mr. I.K. Pond walked on his hands, or lifted the little red devils (now Mrs. H.B. Fuller of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Mr. W.P. Dickerson of Cleveland, Ohio) who had led the procession, up to sit at either end of the high mantel, where they stayed throughout the evening until a Virginia Reel brought the party to a close.

LIFE AT EAGLE'S NEST CAMP

"The bluff is high, and the paths down to the river are steep," my mother told us. "Lincoln knew the Rock River in the Black Hawk War. The Indians believed that a tremendous serpent once made its way through that part of Illinois, leaving a deep, winding track behind him, which gradually filled with water, and we call it the Rock River." We smiled wanly. "What about now? What else? Go on." "The boys can build a boat, set a line, and sell catfish to the camp," she said, and adding with a look at my sister and myself, "Mrs. Taft has a new baby." "Let's go!" we shouted.

We arrived on an evening train and stayed over night at the Spoor House. In the morning our bags and bundles were piled into the camp wagon behind old Captain, and we set off across the bridge, along the river road, and up through the lacey woods to our new summer home: a large tent near the edge of the bluff.

That night it rained, our tent-fly leaked, our beds were soaked. I can still see my mother's bleak face—she was no pioneer—as she moved back and forth in the wavering candle-light putting an opened umbrella over each sleepy child. Before long the first part of our house back in the woods was ready, and we were soon moved and settled in a permanent summer home.

Other houses were going up that summer, and as the years went by and more money came in, fireplaces, screened porches, small kitchens, bedrooms, and bathrooms were added.

Those first summers were exciting. The artists were young, their reputations lay ahead of them; they were poor, but there was work to be done—they were eager and gay and confident.

There was activity everywhere. Walking through the camp, you might see Mr. Browne trudging along the edge of the bluff, whistling or singing, carrying his easel, his paint box, and the picture he had just finished; you might come across Mr. Grover on the spring road soberly smoking his pipe and working on a large canvas; or in his studio in the woods you might find Mr. Taft modeling the head of some curious child who had wandered in to watch, or see him high on the scaffolding, working with a dedicated concentration on a huge clay figure; or you might be invited into Mr. Clarkson's studio to see a portrait. Mr. Rollin D. Salisbury, Mr. A.A. Michelson, Mr. Chamberlain, General Carter, Mr. Heckman and his daughter Mrs. Marc Hirschl were all painted here.

The work done in the first twenty-five years of the camp went to every part of this country, to South America, to galleries from Seattle to Washington D.C.; it found permanent homes in universities, art museums, and in private homes, for these men were making names for themselves, their work was sought after, orders were coming in.

During all those years a procession of stimulating creative people came and went. There were students spending the summer, there were teachers and musicians, there were writers and social workers and business men; in fact, anyone interested in or connected with the arts who happened to be in or near Chicago sooner or later turned up for a week-end, often for several week-ends.

I remember Bert Leston Taylor of Line-o-type fame and his family; Mr. and Mrs. Robert Peattie and their two sons; Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hammond and their two sons' President and Mrs. Judson of the University of Chicago; James Westfall Thompson, Rollin D. Salisbury, A. A. Michelson, and James Breasted of the University of Chicago Faculty' Fanny Bloomfield Zeisler, the famous pianist Ernest Thompson Soion, Dwight and Lucy Fitch Perkins, Charles Eastman, the Indian writer, Percy Hammond, dramatic critic of the Chicago Tribune, Evelyn Longman (Mrs. Batahelder), and many many others.

They all contributed something to the texture of those busy, happy, faraway days. From the students we heard shop-talk about armatures, casting, pigment, painting with a palette knife, blue distances, Frank Murphy; hand-made frames, the artist colony at Taos, lighting problems, pig-headed juries, the dramatic moment when the first picture was sold or the first contract for sculpture was signed. Older visitors brought glimpses of distant horizons, stories of Greece and Spain and Egypt, of adventures in far-off times and places, of grueling work and bitter disappointment, of books and libraries and scholarship, and even of fame. There were giants in those days.

A day at Eagle's Nest Camp began at 6:45 with a long drawn-out jangling of the plumber's pipes which hung at one side of the camp house porch. No one moved. When at seven-thirty a second bell announced that breakfast was ready, out came Mr. Browne in his black beret, singing an aria at the top of his voice; across the wet grass Mrs. Fiske carefully made her way; the Grover's came in single file, soberly hoping the eggs were done' the Taft's always brought a smile and a joke; and Mr. Clarkson, full of the day's responsibilities, served up the oatmeal. Any late-comers meekly slipping into his place was welcome by leering circle of faces chanting, "Late! Late! Late!

Conversation at breakfast was usually concerned with the routine details of the day:

"Is anyone going to town?"

"I am,"

"Tell Mrs. What's-her-name that she only sent back half of my pajamas."

"I'll put my kerosene can in the wagon."

"Put a five-cent stamp on this letter, will you please? I'll leave a nickel on the wagon seat. And get me a yard of elastic—Oh, about that wide."

"There's no ice."

"If you see Doctor Beveridge, tell him I've got poison ivy. Ask him what to do."

And so on, until all at the table had scattered to their various duties, dinner was at one—a leisurely, merry time, for the morning's work was done, the food was in the ice-box, the long summer's afternoon lay ahead. If there were guests, we lingered for an hour around the table, listening. I

remember how spellbound we were over Mr. Breasted's stories of his work in Egypt, sometimes we even listened to each other! It was fascinating to hear Mrs. Grover describe their life in Venice, or to share Mr. Clarkson's memories of his Connecticut boyhood when John Greenleaf Whittier and May Baker Eddy were his neighbors.

Supper was at six. If there were guests coming on the evening train, a lantern procession to meet them at the gate was sometimes planned. Then the chairs were pushed back, and one and all adjourned to the porch of the camp house to watch the sun do down. Standing at the edge of the bluff, some of the painters would make frames of their hands, studying the scene as a composition' some would twist themselves upside-down to see the color without the form; others would sit along the edge of the porch watching the sun, speculating behind which tree it would finally disappear.

Presently the first star would twinkle in a apple-green sky, a whip-poor-will would call and call again, an owl would give a timid cry, a breath of cool air would creep out of the woods' and as the great dipper soared into the dark sky, and lamp-lights shone out of the cabin windows, another leisurely, happy summer's day came to an end.

This account of Eagle's Nest Camp would not be complete without a word about the servants who, over the years, helped in such substantial ways to make it the happy, carefree place it was.

Our first cook was Mary, and I do not remember anything about her but her name and a comical picture of her pig-tailed little daughter, Olli Boga, standing shoulder-deep in the grass by the kitchen.

Harper, a gifted student of Mr. Brown's belongs to these early days, too. He waited on the table when it stood outdoors under a tent-fly, and painted in his spare time. When that was is a mystery, but I remember one exhibition of his oil paintings that showed real talent.

Skip a few years now, and listen to Hattie singing in the Kitchen. She was a handsome woman in her middle years, who in spite of rheumatism and two orphaned grandsons, managed to cook and sing her way through the summer. Harold, a good natured lump of a boy fifteen or sixteen years old, spent two summers at the camp waiting on tables and helping his grandmother. He trundled her back and forth to her cabin in the wheelbarrow to the tune of her shrieks and hideous threats, but otherwise his help was not spectacular. To the younger people, he was a source of endless hilarity. He would come in to get the dirty dishes, wearing a white coat and pushing a tea-cart, which said, "Spirit of St. Louis." When he brushed off the crumbs between courses, he used a plate and a clean napkin, as he had been properly taught, but with a poker-face turned towards us, as he always managed to push the crumbs onto the floor, as he held the plate someplace else.

In her youth Hattie's voice must have been lovely, for even during her camp years it was sweet and high and true. with a quality something like

Dorothy Maynor's. When her day's work was coming to a close, she often sang hymns and spirituals, and the group on the porch would stop their chatter and fall silent, listening to "Sing Low, Sweet Chariot," or "The Old-Time Religion."

One summer Hattie gave a concert for the camp, the Heckerman's, and a few friends from the village. The Taft's piano was moved out onto the lawn, chairs and cushions were arranged in a semi-circle, and when the guests were seated, Harold Hammond took his place at the piano. A hush fell on the little audience as all faces turned towards the woods; for there came Hattie dressed in an embroidered satin evening gown with a train. Where the dress came from, no one knew—perhaps from her own past, for she said she had sung in concerts in her youth; at any rate, she looked very handsome as she took her place by the piano and faced her friends with a simple dignity which was authentic and moving. I do not remember her program, but I know that she sang and sang, and that as the moon sailed across the sky, suddenly it was an Occasion, with wistful and courageous overtones.

The last ten years were blest indeed, by the presence of Asa and Louella. He was a waiter at the Illinois Athletic Club during the winter, but when summer came they were glad to leave the hot city for three months in the country. She was stout and motherly, an experienced cook, a sweet-tempered, kind person. Sunday morning she cooked pancakes, and I have in front of me her recipe, which I included for the happiness of anyone interested:

Sift together 1-3/4 cups flour	1-1/2 teasp. Baking powder
2 teasp. Sugar	1 teasp. Soda
1 teasp. Salt	

Beat two eggs hard. Add one cup sour cream. Mix all together. Cut bacon in mall bits, drop on skillet and pour one tablespoon of batter over each piece of bacon. Turn and cook till brown. Do not have skillet too hot.

Asa was thin and straight, with a dignified, strong face, something like Booker Washington's. He drove the Ford which had long since replaced Captain's weary old age, and no matter how many errands there were, nor how many trips he had to make, he was always happy and responsible. They were quiet, even-tempered and good, there was peace in the kitchen during those years, and good food on the table. They are still loved and appreciated.

I have just re-read this chapter and realized for the first time that all those I have mentioned were Negroes. I am happy indeed to pay this small tribute to them and to their patient, gifted race.

Faced with the necessity of making their own fun, the campers soon became expert. They dug up old party dresses, they begged or borrowed their neighbor's velvet curtains, they saved counterpanes and old fashioned tablecloths, and out of this discarded finery they made costumes that served on dozens of diverse occasions.

The train from Chicago got to Oregon about nine o'clock, and on Friday evenings at about the time Captain could be expected to arrive with week-end guest, Japanese lanterns would come bobbing along the paths and down the road to the gate. There, the campers, wrapped in shawls or in long capes, waited in the velvety darkness, talking quietly among themselves (about food and washing and tomorrow's errands), listening to the whip-poor-wills, or watching the great arch of the Milky Way.

Presently out of the woods would come the sound of voices and the creak-creak, creak-creak of the camp wagon, the lanterns would move back and forth and someone would walk a few steps down the road to listen and report. "Must have been the wind, or a branch falling. I didn't hear anything."

"But I heard the Heckman's dog bark."

"Likely he smells fox or a coon."

"Here they come—I think."

Some one else would walk down the road, and at last the reporting voice would have authority. "They're Here! I see them! Everybody spread out!" Then "How are you? I'll take your bag! Welcome to Eagle's Nest!" Captain would be led off to his rest as the campers and their guest disappeared into the welcoming houses.

Once when Mr. Grover had been the only man in camp for several weeks, he dressed up like a Turk in a turban and baggy trousers, the women and children covered their faces and heads with veils, and like a well-trained harem, stood meekly behind him when Captain stopped at the gate with our unsuspecting guests. Another time all were dressed like gypsies waiting around a campfire on a ledge in the stone quarry.

The big day of the year, however, was Labor Day. Then the campers trailed through the woods in costume, to pay the rent ninety-nine cents to Mr. and Mrs. Heckman. These were great occasions. The procession would wind along the path carrying banners which announced, one year, "Art is long, but roads are longer," and "Food, not paint." Another year all the costumes were made of news papers. One year the theme was Chinese, and "The Yellow Jacket" was produced on the Heckman's front porch in the Chinese manner. Once all were Indians, pursuing a few shrieking women and children in a covered wagon. That the wagon was pulled by Captain made their escape hazardous indeed.

Of all the Labor Day processions, however, the most outstanding was the one in honor of Mr. James Breasted, recently returned from years of distinguished research in Egypt. He was led on foot through the woods to the camp gate, where a row of living statues, dressed in the manner of the Colossi of Memnon, waited in the moonlight to welcome him. The next day the campers, dressed in Egyptian costumes and led by a boy playing the flute, trailed along the bluff and up to the Heckman house. When all had gathered around the porch where Mr. and Mrs. Heckman and their guest were waiting, Mr. Breasted made an eloquent speech in Arabic, and presented two manacled slaves. Whether they took the place of the rent history does not say.

As usual, the whole camp was invited to supper, which was always bountiful and delicious. Big bowls of home-made doughnuts and pots of fragrant coffee will forever be associated in my mind with those festive occasions, with the end of our long carefree summers, with the call of school, and the far-away life of the city.

Eagle's Nest Camp was fortunate in having as guest for several summers Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hammond of Chicago. Their son Harold was a musician of outstanding talent, and it was due to his ability and taste, plus the enthusiasm of Jessie Heckman, that the campers were able to produce two Gilbert and Sullivan operas, "Patience," and "The Mikado." For a month before each of those Labor Day productions, costumes were being made, choruses drilled, and stage settings assembled in front of the camp house fireplace. At the same time, in every corner of the camp, someone was rehearsing his part. "Twenty lovesick maidens we" floated out of the Taft house, or out of ours; Mr. Browne march into lunch warbling "If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily;" and everywhere there was laughing and eager talk. Guests invited for the Labor Day week-ends without exception pronounced the performances magnificent.

One summer, led by Mr. Taft's enthusiasm, the campers memorized Maurice Maeterlinck's play, "The Blind," and gave it in French. We felt fully equal to the demands of the French language, but it helped, no doubt, to have Miss Elizabeth Wallace of the University of Chicago French faculty as a guest in the camp. She not only came to rehearsals which were held on the rocky point back of Mr. Taft's studio, where the play was given, but she invited us--no, she dragged us to her room, not once but repeatedly, day after day, for individual drill. Out of this amateur performance grew Mr. Taft's moving group called "The Blind."

Those were happy days indeed. And now from where I sit at my desk, setting down these memories, I can see the long slope of the camp house roof, the snow on the red tiles of the Taft house, and the faint outline of the Fiske log cabin. It is hard to believe that I do not also see figures moving back and forth or children jumping off of the camp house porch, or young people trudging up the steep path with paddles over their shoulders; that I do not hear the Taft's piano, or Hattie trilling and warbling as she slams the pan and dishes about in the kitchen. It is hard to realize that the operas and the plays, the processions, the costumes, the home made fun, which stand forth so vividly in memory belong to a world that has quietly slipped into the far distant past, to a time when the sun moved slowly across the summer sky, when there were no cars, no movies, no radio, no planes; when inside our small horizons, at least, there was leisure, security and peace.

The End