



Roughing It and Loving It

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Hello, muddah. Hello, faddah. Things have changed at Camp Granada. They've got A/C and real plumbing, and the tech lab guy just told me Wi-Fi's coming.

When you send your kids to camp this summer, don't be surprised if you receive a letter—or more likely an email—that starts off like this. Summer camp has definitely changed a lot since those rustic days of yesteryear. Everywhere you look, traditional activities like hiking and handicrafts must compete for attention with computers and video production. Everywhere you look, Capture the Flag has been abandoned in favor of a “noncompetitive supportive environment.” Everywhere you look, creature comforts outnumber woodland creatures by a ratio of two to one. Everywhere you look....

Well, not quite everywhere. Tucked away in upstate New York is a Christian boys' camp that time forgot and that the decades cannot improve (to paraphrase Garrison Keillor). In a landscape crowded with cutting-edge camps that coddle their campers, Deerfoot Lodge demonstrates that kids still crave the sort of rugged experience their parents and grandparents enjoyed.

Deerfoot Lodge's director, Ron Mackey—Chief Ron to his campers—said people often ask him why his camp is so successful. “It's sort of comical—as if we have some kind of innovative secret,” he said. The camp's “secret” is that it still operates more or less the way it did when it first opened back in 1930. Despite the absence of computers, video games, care packages, motorboats, and showers (more about hygiene later), despite minimal advertising, and despite a cost of \$840 per two-week session, the camp's four summer sessions fill up quickly year after year.

Tom and Carol Walton of Louisville were initially put off by the cost when they heard about Deerfoot Lodge several years ago. Friends at church thought the camp

would be perfect for their son Matt, who was 12 at the time, but they weren't sure about the cost—or about putting their pre-teen son on an airplane to Albany, N.Y. In the end, they relented, and Matt attended Deerfoot for the first of what became five straight summers. His younger brother Reese went three summers until scheduling conflicts made attending impossible. "They begged to go back," Carol said.

So what exactly did the Walton boys beg to go back to? Depending on their age—the camp accepts boys from ages 8 through 16—campers sleep in cabins or tipis and eat in a dining hall. The daily program revolves around 11 activity areas, including swimming, survival, campcraft, and archery. Campers can earn awards in each area, eventually joining the vaunted Lone Eagle Fellowship after several years of work. They also take two overnight hikes to other parts of the Adirondacks.

It was on one of those overnight hikes that Reese learned that chipmunk tastes just like chicken. A chipmunk was trying to steal his group's trail mix, so the counselor made an impromptu trap, caught the critter, and cooked it. "Needless to say, it was the highlight of the trip," Reese said.

Not quite so exciting, he said, was "Soap Scrub," the Deerfoot equivalent of the Saturday night bath. Every couple of days, all the campers line up, soap in hand, to jump in the lake and get clean. ("If you don't, they throw you in," Reese said.) Matt captured the Soap Scrub experience in an early letter home: "Don't even get me started on how nasty that is," he wrote.

Of course, those old Saturday-night baths were designed to get you ready for Sunday morning; cleanliness is next to godliness, after all. Even though cleanliness is next to impossible at camp, Deerfoot Lodge maintains a strong emphasis on "building godly young men in a Christ-centered environment of wilderness camping," as its mission statement says. It achieves that mission through Sunday services, ample devotional time, plenty of singing, and close interaction with staff members. Since the camp has one counselor for every five campers, "there are many opportunities to model behavior," Chief Ron said.

And then there's the 3012 program. Each camper is challenged to do 3000 pushups and learn 12 verses of Scripture during the two-week camp session; those who meet the challenge earn a special, highly coveted T-shirt. (If you're keeping score, that T-shirt costs just over 200 pushups a day!)

T-shirts and Bible verses aside, Deerfoot Lodge remains rugged, as Tom Walton learned when he attended his first dad's weekend. "They told us, 'This has been a rather unusual session because the camp has been attacked by two bears,'" he said. Although the closest thing Tom got to a bear was some bear scat on a trail, that was enough to keep him from sleeping much the night.

Bears were the least of Reese's worries near the end of one summer session. During an overnight hike, he accidentally spilled hot chocolate in his boot. After hiking two miles back to camp with second-degree burns, he earned a trip to the health clinic in nearby Speculator, N.Y. The doctor there asked if he wanted to go home, but Reese refused. Turning to a camp staffer, the doctor said, "What is it you do to these boys? Nobody ever wants to leave."

Little did the doctor know how true his statement was. Many campers are the sons—or grandsons—of Deerfoot campers. At least 75 percent of staff members are previous Deerfooters. Chief Ron, now in his second year as director, began his career as an eight-year-old camper back in 1974. The director of food service is a Long Eagle and long-time camper and staff member (and, by the way, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America).

So why do people go back year after year? According to Reese, the answer is simple. “It’s freedom; you can do whatever you want,” he said.

And that—plus a good spiritual foundation and a great recipe for roasted chipmunk—will take you far in life.