

GROWING UP AT CAMP

Ken F. Keller, December 2006

We spend most of our time and energy in a kind of horizontal thinking. We move along the surface of things. . . [but] there are times we stop. We sit still. We lose ourselves in a pile of leaves or its memory. We listen and breezes from a whole other world begin to whisper.

— JAMES CARROLL

Casa Chica – Ben Hur #16



My parents, Francis and Lillian Keller, were frequent visitors at Camp in the early 1930s before their marriage in 1936. Dad purchased our cabin (No.16 Ben Hur) in 1935. Though not previously owned, it had been used as a bar by the Wrecking Crew (my dad was a member) and, according to my mom, was littered with beer bottles – hundreds of them.

At that time my dad was a plastering contractor in San Antonio. Not pleased with the cabin's construction, he completely tore it down and

rebuilt using large cedar post piers to avoid termite damage and provide a sufficiently solid foundation to support a plastered interior. Because he wanted my mother, who very much a “city girl”, to enjoy the cabin, he made it as much like a small home as possible. In fact, my parents named it Casa Chica.



The cabin as it looked in 1935



Ben Hur #16 ready for guests

Dad installed double hung windows, which were a departure from the pull-up shutters prevalent throughout Camp at the time – the ones that caused a lot of head injuries from walking into them in the dark. The cabin was plastered throughout and given Spanish arches and tile accents. Hardwood floors, a double-headed interior shower, a tile kitchen, and a butane powered refrigerator and heaters made the cabin useable year-round.

Dad built almost everything himself. He did hire a man to install a standing seam tin roof in 1937. I mention this because it offers insight into the prevailing wages of the day. The installation cost \$10; I don't know whether this payment included the materials or just the labor, but either way it brings home the depreciated value of our dollars compared to the Depression era. Seventy years of trouble-free service certify the workmanship to be exceptional.

The size of cabins at Alzafar was strictly controlled in the early days. All were originally built 12 wide by 20 feet long. Owners were allowed to extend the length to 30 feet if they wished, but the width could not be altered. The rationale was to maintain an egalitarian environment within Camp proper such that wealthy Nobles could not dramatically overshadow those with more modest means.

These dimensions were so strict that when my father proposed a wood burning fireplace with masonry chimney with the fire box extending outward beyond the cabin's width dimension, it was denied. Dad had to abandon his plans in favor of a false fireplace equipped with a butane heater. The option for individuals to build larger cabins or homes was theoretically available on Camp property up the road, but no one ever chose to build there.



Like Ben Hur #16, many others had not been sold due to the Depression. The Temple encouraged cabin "owners" with means to buy a second cabin and several did. My father did not, but our neighbor Gus Speiser owned the two cabins immediately next to ours. Al Green and A. A. Jacobson, among others, owned two cabins each. By the 1950s, when economic conditions had improved, Nobles with two cabins were encouraged to sell one and most did so.

I made my first visit to Camp Alzafar on a pillow in late April of 1938 at six weeks old. Of course I have no recollection of this baptismal visit, but it was the beginning of a life long love affair with Camp.

Camp in the 40s and 50s: The Way It Was

The first memory of Camp I can date with certainty is December 7, 1941. Not yet four years old, I was standing by a table model radio in our cabin when the news flash came that the Japs (a 1940s term)

had bombed Pearl Harbor, sinking much of our Pacific fleet and killing hundreds of servicemen. My dad was out squirrel hunting; my mom was in the kitchen, and she explained to me that this was a significant event.



It proved to be a huge one. World War II mobilized the entire nation, and millions of men were drafted into the armed forces. My father was put out of business as steel supplies were diverted totally to war production, and we were forced to move to Oklahoma.

Outside #16 Ben Hur circa 1941

War Time Utilities

Electric wires ran from cottage to cottage. If you were at the end of the wire, and a few folks upstream turned on hot plates in the morning, you likely couldn't cook breakfast or even boil water. Our solution was to get up early and cook before other cabins became active. This power deficit was fixed when Camp got modern electric service after WWII.

Telephone service was also primitive at Camp until well after WWII. The phone line ran along the road attached to trees, and the only phone – a wooden wall model with a hand crank on the side and an ear piece on a wire – was in the caretaker's quarters. Since Camp was one of 23 parties on the same line, it was understood that lots of folks would be listening in on phone conversations. Of course, calls were few since long distance was so expensive and in large measure reserved for birth and death notifications. Alzafar's ring was three longs and a short.

Our water was good to drink right out of the wells. In fact, the river water was considered an acceptable alternative. No one treated or filtered the water back then, and to my knowledge no one ever got sick from drinking Camp water.

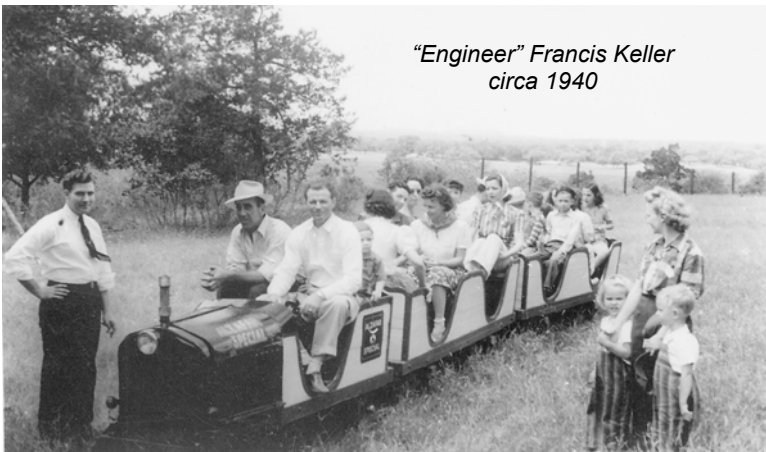
Entertainment

There was no television and radio entertainment was spotty due in part to weather effects on AM reception. When we could get WOAI in San Antonio we listened to such half hour programs as The Long Ranger, The Shadow, The Green Hornet, and Red Skelton. Walter Winchell's Sunday evening news program that always signed on with, "Good evening Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea" was another regular attraction.

A popular feature of the Pavilion was a Nickelodeon, a machine that played records. Fifty or so 78 rpm records of popular music cost a nickel a song to play. The Jitterbug was a popular dance in the 1940s, and our Nickelodeon offered plenty of appropriate music. Spud and Lela Gullette's two children, Jimmie and Marian, knew all of the Jitterbug moves, some of them quite athletic.

Several Nobles were good tennis players. Doc Weiser and Van Mabrito were two who took time to teach those of us who were interested some of the basic strokes. We would often spend hours watching the adults play challenge matches. Since we had lights on the tennis court and the evenings were notably cooler, this was often the evening activity of choice.

The tennis court was always a source of great concern for mothers. The steep steps and distance down to the court combined to create a potentially dangerous situation. In those days there was no fence to prevent a person from falling all the way to the bottom, the consequences of which would almost certainly be death or severe injury. Fortunately we never suffered any severe accidents.



*"Engineer" Francis Keller
circa 1940*

The Camp train, a romantic expression of society's love of big passenger trains of the era, began its run at the "depot" near the tennis court. The Alzafar Special was powered by a Ford engine with a spark advance lever on the steering column. This relic of the early automobile was an excellent training device for questioning and understanding the need for spark advancement on internal combustion engines, which by the 1940s had been automated in the then modern distributors.

Our train was usually fired up only on weekends and everyone got to ride. It was as popular with adults as with children and often filled beyond capacity. Adults made the cars less stable on the turns and there was little or no super elevation built into the curved track bed, which caused the cars to lean over in the turns. This eventually proved a tragic combination; on August 23, 1942, a car rolled over and Mrs. G. G. Grabenke, the 45 year old wife of Alzafar's 1933 potentate, was thrown out and hit her head on a rock. She died two days later in a hospital.

The River



At the river circa 1932

Recreational access to the Guadalupe was best from the diving rock below the steps (at one time you could actually dive safely from it) down to the beach where the rope swing is often located. The frontage above the diving rock and below the beach/rope tree was hardly used by anyone except those who fished, primarily because trees, underbrush, and flood debris made the bank nearly impassable.

Sometimes young women (college age) would go upstream to sunbath topless on the rock ledges above the river. They pretended not to know they were visible from the cliff above. This was an enormous attraction for us boys. Tanning was a constant summer obsession among young women in

the 40s and 50s. Baby oil and similar products were thought to enhance tanning and were widely used. We were all essentially ignorant of skin cancer dangers, and ran around outside from before breakfast to after sunset in nothing but our bathing suits.

The river generally had a good flow except during the prolonged drought in the 1950s. One summer during this period there was NO visible flow. The bed was dry all the way across between some of the deep pools, although there was just enough sub-surface trickle to keep the pools from becoming totally stagnant.

Extreme flooding occurred from time to time. During one flood, the water came up high enough to cover the field across the river from our bluff. It did not, however, isolate Camp by coming across the road into the area now known as Deadman's Creek. My father told me of a flood in the 1930s that stranded him in Camp with water lapping at the cattle guard below our cabin. This flood and one or two in more recent history (post 1960s) of similar severity were likely the highest flood levels in Camp's history.

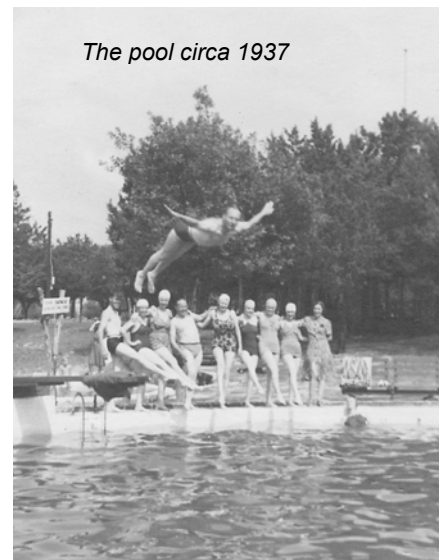


The pool circa 1937

The Pool

The swimming pool was the center of daily life for almost everyone in Camp. The Camp Brats of that era logged hundreds of hour each summer in the pool. Noble Jack Blankfield and his wife Flossy were always available to assist anyone who wanted to learn to swim. They must have taught dozens of kids.

We had a somewhat different facility than exists today. There



The pool circa 1937

was no filter system and algae formation made the pool look dark. Prior to Memorial Day and prior to Labor Day the pool was cleaned and refilled. Some years it also received a cleaning before the 4th of July.

It took a day or so to drain the pool, which flooded everything below the pool all the way to the river road. Another day or two were needed to clean the algae out; and refilling took at least two or more days, depending on the wells' output.

Since there was no filter system, algae quickly re-covered all underwater surfaces. It was sort of like swimming and diving in a small round lake. Generally you could not see the bottom of the pool. This was an asset for young boys sneaking up underwater on unsuspecting girls. Chlorine was not used at the time as a pool disinfectant, but I do not recall anyone getting sick from swimming in our pool.



A compound called Bluestone (copper sulfate) was thrown into the pool every week to help control the algae growth. It was a hard cake-like compound that was cobalt blue in color. Buckets of this stuff were thrown in, usually on Sunday morning early. I think the timing was to discourage us from swimming prior to Jimmie Bruce's Sunday school lesson. Regardless, most of us kids wore bathing suits on Sunday morning so we could hit the water shortly after the last "Amen."

The mote-like channel around the pool was occasionally filled with water, so you could – theoretically – wash trash and dirt off your feet before entering the pool. In practice this mini-mote was home to lots of slippery algae and frogs, an occasional snake, many species of water bugs, and of course lots of cedar droppings. The same can be said of the baby pool, now filled in, that was home to lots of critters and rarely fit for use.



Ready for a swim circa 1936

Sometimes we congregated around the pool and listened to camp tales. One that was often repeated was of the panther (mountain lion). It seems one of the Nobles entering camp one evening spotted a large panther just inside the second cattle guard. He reported shooting at the cat but missed. Most of the storytellers discounted this tale because the individual was known to drink a little, perhaps more than a little. Regardless, this story tended to reinforce the fact that we were deep in the hills where dangerous animals roamed. This made our adventures more exciting. I never saw a mountain lion at camp but from time to time I did find large cat tracks. One evening in the 40s, as we were gathered by the pool, a skunk and a rattlesnake got into a confrontation under the caretaker's house. I think it was a draw, but the stench lingered for days afterwards.

The baby pool circa 1949

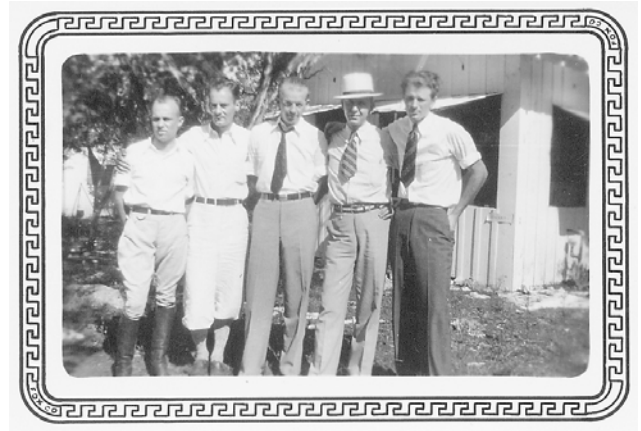
The pool also served as an evening venue of choice for young adolescents exploring mutual attractions. What could be better than a dark pool of cool water under a starlit sky for such exploratory encounters?

Going to Town

Boerne seemed forever stuck at a population of 946 people as shown on the city limits signs. There was one traffic light in town where the public library is located today. The paved road stopped where the 90 degree turn is in front of the high school. Of course the high school was right in town then.

After WWII the Farm-to-Market program paved the road we know as 474. Adler's grocery and hardware store was located where Bergman's Lumber Company is now. The Ebenberger lumber company and funeral home was directly across the street. Mrs. Ebenberger started an antique shop in the outer part of the office. I believe it was the first such store in town. Over time it grew into a major business, and she moved her wares to her own building just south of Cibolo Creek.

The ice house was on Cibolo Creek. The science of making ice was akin to magic and definitely high tech for the era. Everyone stopped there to get ice for their iceboxes. Blocks weighed 25 and 50 lbs. Even though we had a butane refrigerator for food and limited ice making, we kept a tin-lined wooden chest of ice for making ice tea and freezing ice cream. With no air conditioning, we drank a lot of ice tea. There were no plastic ice chests. Plastic as a consumer products material was in its infancy.



Dressed for town circa 1934

Summers at Alzafar

Between 1942 and 1953 my mother and I spent every summer in Camp from Memorial Day thru Labor Day. After my sister Barbara arrived in 1946, she too was a Camp Brat. My mother's commitment to our summer recreation was a labor of love. My father would bring us to Camp in May; spend a week of his vacation, then return to Oklahoma City where he worked for the Army Air Corps (later the US Air Force).

We only had one car, so mom and I and my sister were more or less immobile throughout the summer. The caretaker would do grocery shopping for us in Boerne every couple of weeks, and Mom's friends from San Antonio and elsewhere brought supplies when they came to visit. Dad returned in late August and spent another week or so before we had to button up Casa Chica for another year.

On Sundays we always had a church service/Sunday school at the Pavilion. We almost always sang "The Old Rugged Cross" among other classic hymns. I would go to the Pavilion early so I could ring the bell calling others to church. Our bell was once a railroad engine bell on a Katy train.

At Camp I learned to swim, fish, track, hunt, and trap. I was introduced to weapons safety, marksmanship, archery, and herpetology; as apprentice to my father and any other patient adult, I acquired carpentry, plumbing, masonry, and electrical skills. Cooking was also added to my repertoire in the form of barbecue, fried catfish, and custard for homemade ice cream. Along the way, I also learned some valuable lessons about life.

Sharing 101

I remember that during WWII many of the women and children in camp had husbands and fathers away at war. News of any kind from any loved one in Africa, Europe, or the Pacific was shared widely. Everything was rationed to support the war effort, and we shared our food stamps and gas rations so that everyone had what was needed. I particularly liked Dole fruit cocktail but it cost 81 points worth of food ration stamps and that was a luxury. If there were enough stamps left over in Camp each month our neighbors would share, and the extra points went toward buying me a can of this delight.

Disease 101

Polio was widespread. Almost everyone had friends with a child who was permanently crippled. I remember mothers were terrified of the disease and no one knew what caused it. Consequently, fear and ignorance caused mothers to insist on their children resting during the heat of the day as a preventative. There was no air conditioning and I do not recall any evaporative coolers, at least not during the war years. It was almost as hot indoors as it was outside. Staying inside to rest was pure agony for us kids when exploring and swimming were waiting for us outside.

Death 101

Dr. E. A. Chatten, a retired medical doctor, lived full-time in the third cabin up from ours. He was a great old guy and showed me how he cleaned soft shell turtles and made soup from them. Near the bottom of the stairs to the river he created a spring by drilling into the rock formation with a hammer and drill and installing a pipe. He worked an hour or so a day for a long time. I went down with him a few times when he worked on his project. The steady drip he created in this shady place produced a wet micro eco-environment where delicate ferns flourished for decades after his passing. I have often reflected on what a neat thing he left for all of us to enjoy.

One morning after my dad and I had gone to the river to run our trotlines, I was sent over to offer him a fish. He was still in bed and I couldn't wake him even by shaking him. He was dead, having died in his sleep. I remember my sense of loss as I learned about death.

Celebration 101

The wildest party I ever witnessed at Camp was on August 15, 1945, V-J Day. There were lots of people in Camp, including many wives of men away at war. Although victory had been achieved in Europe earlier in the year, the Jap surrender in the Pacific where US casualties had been so very high at places like Guadalcanal (7,100+), Iwo Jima (6,800+), and Okinawa (12,500+) released enormous pent up tension. The adults circulated around Camp from cottage to cottage all night drinking, eating, and celebrating. It was a spontaneously joyous time for everyone. No one seemed to care about forcing us kids to go to bed, so we were free to roam about, eat at every party, and participate in the festivities.

Earth Science 101

Ken Keller and catfish circa 1947

The creek, known now as Deadman's Creek, had a small spring near the opening to the cave that extends under Camp. Fresh water trickled from the spring through a series of shaded pools before emptying into the river near our property line. The pools were always full of tadpoles and frogs in various states of growth – a constant source of awe and education for young explorers.



A pair of blue racers also lived there for several years in the 40s and 50s – pretty to watch, impossible to catch – a variety of king snakes, and all four North American poisonous snakes – rattler, copperhead, water moccasin, and coral. In addition to whitetail deer we had a few turkeys and buzzards, cottontail and jackrabbits, rock and grey squirrels, armadillos, skunks, possums, coons, horn toads, and the ubiquitous red ants.

We sought adventure by exploring the two known Camp caves when the entrances weren't blocked due to flood deposits or rock obstructions. Our cave penetrations were limited, which was probably a good thing since there was no one to come to our rescue had we gotten lost or our lights failed. Exploring between Camp and the entry cattle guard would occasionally produce a flint arrow tip that conjured up images of the “wild Indians” that hunted and roamed before the “white man” arrived.

Fishing 101

Fishing focused on catfish. Although you could catch a few on a bamboo pole or with a rod and reel, my dad taught me that it was more effective to seine for live bait (shiners, red horses, perch, trout, and suckers) in the late afternoon and bait my lines just before dark. We would run the lines early the following morning just prior to sunrise.

Getting into the river at dawn was a special delight. We caught yellow and channel cats as well as soft shell turtles, alligator gars, and a few snakes. A weeks worth of 3-5 fish a day would insure a great fish fry for guests on the weekends. Usually the fish were in the 2-5 lbs. category. The largest fish I ever caught at Camp was a 12 lb. yellow catfish on a throw line using a live sucker as bait. By fishing with worms I occasionally caught keeper-sized Rio Grande Perch. There were also a few bass and trout in the river, but they were too small to eat.

Hunting 101

Camp offered a sufficiently isolated area to safely support target practice and hunting during the 1940s and 50s. Strauss Grisham, one of Camp's original supporters, was a wonderful mentor to me. Although Strauss didn't buy his cabin (#14 Moslah) until 1940, the Grishams were attendees at the Camp Dedication in the 20s and rented cabins throughout the Depression, which was a common practice. I was always welcome at the Grisham cabin.

Strauss taught me how to shoot accurately and how to hunt wild goats. We used several blind areas near the Camp property line beyond the Camp dump (in from where the dumpsters are located now). Wild goat (*cabrito*) was a staple for barbecue when large groups of friends came to visit on summer weekends. We hunted with 22 caliber rifles; therefore accuracy was crucial. You had to hit the goat in the head and kill it instantly to avoid a long chase after a wounded animal. It was on these hunts I learned tracking and stalking skills, the importance of wind, and the crucial value of remaining absolutely motionless, especially at ground level.

Role Models 101

Strauss's wife Mildred was like a second mom. In fact, I had surrogate moms all over camp: Bess Meadows, Zephie Kelly, Maymee Wharton, Lela Gullette, Ethel Boothe, Jimmie Bruce, Trudy Welch, Hazel Green, Flossy Blankfield and others. I often ate at their tables. Of course, all of my moms were addressed as Mrs. because it would have been unthinkable to call them by their first names. The Grisham cabin was an especially attractive destination because I idolized the Grisham children, both several years older than I. Dale, a handsome lanky young man, was very friendly and let me tag along on his adventures. He later became a pilot, and I believe this connection later influenced

decisions that led to my Air Force career in fighter aviation. His sister Jayne B. was really delightful to be around and also very pretty.

Like the Grisham children, the two Boothe children were also several years older and my idols. Tommy was tall and had an infectious smile. He often took me along fishing and pistol shooting. He later became an Aggie, and I got to meet many of his classmates. They told stories of hazing in the Corp of Cadets where freshmen (called Fish) were physically tested as a right of passage to manhood. These experiences influenced me to attend Texas A&M; I suppose I wanted see if I measured up.

Tommy's sister Janie was a talented artist; and, like her friend Jayne B. Grisham, was a beautiful young woman. They both attracted men and young boys "like flies to honey". Tom Boothe, Sr. and his wife Ethel always made the Keller kid welcome in their cabin as did Tommy and Janie.

Responsibility 101

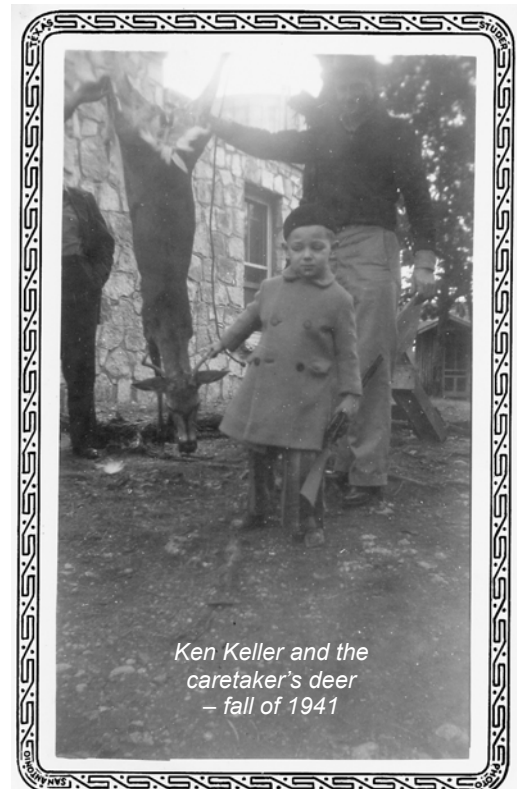
The main holiday meal events held at Camp were great fun because we got to help prepare the barbecue. The barbecue pits available near the Pavilion were inadequate for preparing all the meat. Several additional pits around camp were pressed into service and covered edge to edge with chickens. The chicken fat dripping on the coals caused flare ups which could quickly burn lots of chickens, so some of us were commissioned to sit in front of the pits most of the day with a beer can nailed to a long stick. We filled the beer can with water and reached into the fire box with it to selectively douse flames that flared up and threatened the chicken during the cooking process. We also got to baste the chickens.

Dancing 101

On the big holiday weekends we had great country music to dance to. Typically young boys are a bit bashful about getting out in front of everyone and dancing. However, all of our functions included certain obligatory line dances like *Put Your Little Foot* and *Ten Pretty Girls*. These kinds of dances made it easy for all of us to participate without shyness getting in the way. Before long we could polka with the best of the adults. In the process we developed self-confidence in such social settings.

Construction Skills 101

Over a period of many years my dad and other Nobles taught me construction skills. Much of this training resulted from helping with improvements around Camp. Among other projects, we did lathe and plastering in the public bathroom at the head of Ben Hur St.; tiled a kitchen counter in Jacobson's basement; plastered the ceiling of Gus and Frida Meyers' outdoor table cover; built a masonry wall, barbecue pit, patio cover, and tile table at our cabin; worked on picnic tables below the swimming pool; rebuilt a rock wall for Spud and Lela Gulette; and helped Les and Mame (Maymee) Wharton by adding some wiring in their cabin. Dad even consulted on construction of the wagon wheel Masonic table now at the Pavilion. It was actually built by Harvey McDonald and permanently installed on his patio on the next street over from us. Several decades later the table was moved to the Pavilion



Controversy 101

Historically, there was some tension between sportsmen and those who wanted to ban guns altogether. The gun enthusiasts wanted to train young people to handle weapons safely, develop marksmanship skills, and generally demystify weapons. Most of the youngsters at Camp had no other access to a non-urban setting where such activity could be safely conducted.

Harvey McDonald clearly understood this need and built a good shooting range in the middle pasture with a bench rest shooting table on the near side and target stanchions toward the hill on the opposite side. Lots of young people learned to safely handle weapons and develop marksmanship skills on that gunnery range.

During the winter months, Buck Austin and other Nobles hunted as did most of our caretakers. A few folks were opposed, alleging that having guns and conducting marksmanship training was unjustifiably dangerous for everyone under any circumstance. In those days I don't recall this difference of opinion being a Democratic or Republican issue but on balance the responsible weapons training conducted at Camp was a worthwhile activity. To my knowledge, no one was ever injured as a result.

Public Service 101

The fire hazard at Camp is always high. No one understood this better than Earl Kelly, nicknamed Machinegun Kelly after a 1930s desperado. Earl even had a Thompson sub-machine gun cutout over the door to his cabin advertising his nickname. Earl Kelly acquired a large fire fighting foam bottle on wheels to act as our first line of defense should a fire break out. Previously we had only had small hand-pump water can extinguishers. He explained how foam worked to put out a fire and educated us on fire safety. He built the Alzafar Firehouse (the small rock structure in front of the Pavilion). This building was designed to house the large foam fire extinguisher, and it served for many years until the equipment became non-operational and unsupportable.

We enjoyed decades of really great caretakers that worked hard to keep Camp clean and accessible. I best remember the caretakers that had long tenures. The Harveys came along after WWII and were with us for 7 years. Bob Holbert and his wife both contributed to Camp's ongoing success for 4 years. Our longest sitting caretaker, however, didn't come along until the 70s. John Pritko, US Air Force retired and Alzafar Noble was perhaps the greatest find we could have hoped for as our caretaker. John and his wife served for over 9 years.

John was a man for all seasons. He could do just about anything well. John cleared out the entire river bank, essentially doubling our riverfront access, something that had never been done before. He maintained the camp systems in excellent condition. He had a broad set of interests and hobbies such as astronomy, hand loading, and model airplane construction.

He built an observatory on top of the Pavilion equipped with powerful telescopes and shared its use and his knowledge of the universe with lots of youngsters. He built the screened-in service kitchen we use for large parties, the guest quarters in the Club House building, and the pool's bath houses (with concrete blocks donated by Potentate Thurman Barrett). He was always ready to assist anyone needing help with both expertise and his labor.

Camp Legacy

From a personal viewpoint, John Pritko and his wife Jayne (formerly Jayne B. Grisham) mentored to my two sons Drew and Derek during their summer stays in Camp with my wife Carol. He taught both of them to shoot, shared his inquisitiveness and passion for knowledge with them, and let them follow him

around as he did his work in much the same way other Nobles had helped educate me a generation before. Jayne became one of their Camp Alzafar moms.

Camp Alzafar's climate of Masonic and Shrine fellowship and mentorship to young people is the spirit I remember most from my youth and that of my children. Without the support and positive interaction of Noble people, Camp would be just a sterile group of aging cabins, a swimming pool, a tennis court, and a playground on the Guadalupe River. The Camp esprit is an intangible of place that lives in the hearts and collective memories of all those individuals influenced by Camp Alzafar's unique chemistry of experiences.

Since history has a shelf life of only about 25 years, this chemistry must be sustained by succeeding generations to ensure the same noble outcome a generation hence. Therefore, it is crucial for all who share this Camp esprit to communicate that spirit to the next generation.