

Naticook Day Camp Advisory Board

Annual Report -1996

In recognition of Merrimack's 250th anniversary this year, the Advisory Board's report includes a historical perspective which clarifies the tradition the town hopes to build upon in offering families a quality day camp for children and the young adults who work there.

History

Naticook Day Camp operated an eight-week summer program at Wasserman Park in 1996, marking its second year under direct town management. Though young in its history as a town-run camp, it is actually 60 years since the founding of its predecessor, Naticook Camps in 1937, by Sam Sidman. Mr. Sidman operated separate residential camps for girls and boys on the property, hence the plural name. The counselor in charge of theatre activities that first summer was Rona Lillian Mildred Brown, paid the grand sum of \$35 for the season; another counselor named Joshua (Chic) Wasserman joined the staff the following year. He was a college senior whom Rona persuaded to play the piano for her theatre productions. The encounter led to marriage three years later while Chic was in dental school.

Mrs. Wasserman worked at another summer camp in Maine in succeeding years, becoming a director herself. In 1956 her husband surprised her by announcing that he had bought Naticook Camps, their place of fond memory, on a handshake with Mr. Sidman at a chance encounter at Adamo's, a local restaurant. They reorganized it as one residential camp for girls and boys with the singular name, Camp Naticook.

The Wassermans began a period of 38 years of ownership and management that brought wide recognition to their innovative program. This was a broad curriculum including, for example, dance, gymnastics, theatre, rhythm band, fishing, martial arts, and woodworking as well as the usual sports and arts and crafts offerings.

As part of a balanced program, campers signed up for activities of their preference, maintaining high interest and enthusiasm. A staff to camper ratio of 1:5 to 1:3 depending on age assured good supervision and Camp Naticook consistently achieved 100% ratings for personnel, program, health care, administration and facilities from the American Camping Association (ACA) accreditation review. In addition, the State Board of Health gave "excellent" ratings in its annual inspections.

In early 1988, with the encouragement of the Selectmen, Merrimack Town Manager Daniel Ayer approached the Wassermans about negotiating the acquisition of the 134-acre site for the town's recreational needs. Merrimack lacked adequate playing fields, swimming facilities, and open space; the property contained a swimming pool, lakefront, tennis courts, soccer and softball fields, and a large area of undeveloped land. Mr. Ayer knew of the Wassermans' cooperative stance toward the town since they had for many years allowed the Merrimack Youth Association to use their playing fields in the off-season.

A year and a half of negotiations followed, during which the Wassermans agreed to donate the 46 acres with the camp facilities to the town, provided the town agreed to purchase almost 88 acres of undeveloped land for \$1.75 million to be kept as a natural preserve. The undeveloped land is an important aquifer recharging site, so its value for conservation purposes was apparent. Voters approved the package at the 1989 town meeting, including naming the park in memory of the Wassermans' daughter, Debbi Wasserman Bilowit. Mr. Ayer later told the couple that he considered acquiring Wasserman Park for the town the crowning achievement of his professional life.

The continuation of the camp to which the Wassermans devoted so much effort was part of the negotiated settlement. They agreed to convert the residential camp to a day program for area children, and had begun that process in the summer of 1988. The town signed a management contract with Rona Wasserman, stipulating she would run the camp for the town for five years, which she did through 1994.

One development of note during that period was the inclusion of special needs children as campers in 1990. This was at the request of Alice Porembski, who worked at the Area Agency for Developmental Disabilities, and was also the parent of counselors and campers at Camp Naticook. The Wassermans were receptive to Mrs. Porembski's overture and a pioneering effort began where special needs children are mainstreamed in camp activities to the greatest extent possible. Videotapes of the friendships and progress made by the children now circulate nationwide illustrating powerfully the difference that inclusion can make. The camp hired a special needs coordinator and received financial support from the Area Agency to help implement this program, which continues to grow and develop.

When the management contract with Mrs. Wasserman expired, the Selectmen formed a Park and Camp Committee to make recommendations to Michael Housman, the parks and recreation director, about incorporating the camp into the town's overall use of the Wasserman Park site. The Committee held five meetings and a public hearing over two weeks. It saw no conflict between the operation of a day camp and open access for townspeople to park facilities. It was also particularly concerned with maintaining the tradition of excellence begun by the Wassermans at Camp Naticook, and favored a self-sustaining quality camp accredited by the ACA and open to children of all abilities and interests.

The Parks and Recreation Committee reviewed and endorsed these findings, suggesting the formation of an Advisory Board to assist the town. Town Manager Dean Shankle met with all concerned and drafted a policy statement and operating criteria for a day camp that was accepted by the Selectmen in February, 1995. The Advisory Board was formed that month, with equal representation from the public, town boards and parents of campers.

Among other stipulations, the Board's charge is to help the parks and recreation director provide an accredited, self-supporting, comprehensive program for children of all abilities, ages 5 to 12; offering pre- and post-camp activities for children; and maximizing the participation of children whose families live or work in Merrimack.

In its first year of operation under these criteria, Naticook Day Camp had a full enrollment, with about 60% of campers living in Merrimack and an estimated 15% whose parents worked in Merrimack, for a local representation of 75%. The public had access to park facilities, including an expanded beach area that allowed swimming for community members while town and camp swim lessons went forward. The camp returned a surplus to the town of \$8,500, almost reaching the \$9,000 surplus of the previous year.

Children enjoyed the activities, judging from parent survey responses, and measures to insure the safety of campers while the public used the park were successful. The camp did encounter administrative difficulties because of its late start in hiring and organization, which hampered efficiency. These pointed to areas to address in the coming year.

1996 results

A significant achievement for Naticook Day Camp in 1996 was its reaccreditation by the ACA, following a lengthy self-evaluation and review by a visitation team. The camp scored 100% in all program, personnel and facilities categories, just as Camp Naticook had done. This was the camp's first experience with the process as a town-run organization, and it fulfills an important operating criteria set by the Selectmen. The quality of the day camp is established, easing the earlier concerns of those apprehensive about its success.

The camp benefited mightily from the extensive preparations by Mr. Shankle and Mr. Housman in setting a time line to complete tasks before camp started. Policy manuals, job descriptions, and organizational structure were in place; hiring was timely; training was given; publicity and registrations were more orderly. These allowed Mr. Housman to begin from a solid base. The Board noted substantial improvement throughout the year, and was able to reduce the number of its meetings from 13 to 10 in the current period ..

Staffing: Mr. Housman took on the additional duties of camp director in 1996, following his accreditation by the ACA. Having a full-time town employee manage the camp was the right move since work really begins in earnest in early February and carries on to September. It is important to have someone available as well through the budget season. Mr. Housman is a longtime resident of Merrimack with many contacts among the town's youth; likewise, 20 of the 23 counselors and junior counselors he hired live in Merrimack, a ratio of 87%.

The Advisory Board favored salary increases in order to retain good people, who simply could not afford to return under the old pay schedule. A flat sum is paid for the entire season, which includes 40-hour work weeks plus four overnights and a weekend of orientation. Even with the increase, counselors (over 18 years of age) earned from \$4.05 to \$4.63 per hour, and junior counselors (16 to 18 years) from \$1.74 to \$2.31 per hour. The Board believes the camp received exceptional value at these rates.

The town also decided to continue the long-standing practice of hiring five to six European counselors through a placement program based in England, called Camp America. The Camp America counselors add features the campers enjoy; hearing about other countries, the speech accents, and the specialized skills they bring. They interact effectively with American counselors, and bring a welcome diversity to the camp.

Enrollment: Over the course of four two-week sessions from June 24 through August 16, the camp had an enrollment of 472; that number includes repeat sign-ups. Similar to last year, an estimated 75% of campers were from families who live or work in Merrimack. The Board hopes to increase attendance at the first session which is traditionally smaller due to the intervening July 4th holiday. As the season progresses, many families choose to re-enroll because of their positive experience; hence the later sessions are at much higher capacity.

Budget: In calendar 1996, the camp spent \$124,100, versus \$110,400 in revenues. The \$13,700 deficit was due mostly to increased salaries. Because of the work involved in closing out a June 30 fiscal year, Mr. Housman did not receive a financial statement until August when camp was over; the Board saw the final figures for the year much later. Given a combined surplus of \$17,500 the previous two years of operation, no one was particularly apprehensive until the numbers came in. The camp is promised timely weekly updates of expenditures in 1997. Overall, the town is still ahead by \$3,800, but the budget is a concern.

The Board recommended to Mr. Housman an increase in fees of \$7.50 per week, or \$15 per session in 1997; this would increase revenues by \$7,000. The cost of a camp session has remained at \$200 for at least three years, so the higher cost seems reasonable. The balance of the deficit will be made up by starting a camp store to sell T-shirts, hats, pennants, and assorted items; lower expenditures for program supplies since an inventory has been built up; and better marketing of the first session. It will also be invaluable to have current financial data to monitor expenses as the summer proceeds. The Board opposed reducing salaries below market levels, which would jeopardize hiring the staff the camp values.

Acknowledgments: Everyone is involved in Naticook Day Camp in order to serve children and their families, which we believe we certainly do. We provide a valuable resource for parents, and their

testimonies speak eloquently of the impact we have. The Selectmen deserve credit for agreeing to operate a day camp and allowing the Board to participate in its development. By doing so, it allows for very productive use of the camp facilities that came with Wasserman Park. Mr. Shankle, Mr. Housman and especially the dedicated staff merit recognition and our genuine support for making it all work. The camp has been a part of Merrimack's history for 60 years and we want to see it continue for many more.

Carolyn B. Disco, chairman
January 31, 1997

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The Managers Memo

by

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Rona Wasserman recently passed away.

I was fortunate that I began working here during the final year that she ran the park. Before it was turned over to the Town, I met Rona down at the camp one day and she invited me into her house offering me a soft drink. We sat down in a room dominated by a fine piano; and she told me about her association with the camp.

She had her fiddle band there in the late 1930s when they were both counselors. She always knew music and she had played piano in the theater; They kept it for a few years later, while she was in dental school, they were married.

They always loved summer camps and in succeeding years she sometimes worked in camps in Maine. But they never forget Camp Naticook and in the fall of 1954, when it became available; they purchased it.

Camp Naticook was clearly special to them. They loved the land and they loved the children. And the children loved them back. Earlier, as we were walking to her house groups of children would come running up to her, excitedly telling her what they were doing. She addressed them by name and there was genuine affection between her and them. She remembered the years of fun and of her family's summers there. As we walked around the camp she would point to graffiti in the cabins and tell stories of the young people who had written it. As she read names and years she clearly remembered incidents as if they were yesterday. Her fondness for the place was obvious.

But as we sat in her living room and she recounted her memories, I could hear a sadness creeping in. She began speaking of her daughter, Debbi, who also loved playing the piano. She told me how Debbi had inherited her love for the camp and the children. Even after she married and became Debbi Wasserman Bilowit, she continued her involvement with the camp. Rona and Chic had decided years before that it would be Debbi who would inherit the

camp and run it once they no longer could.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. Debbi died. And so did their dream of keeping the camp in the family. Still, the camp meant too much to them for it to completely disappear. The thought of condominiums springing up where the cabins had been was a thought that Rona could not bear. It had to stay open. It had to stay a camp. For the children. And for Debbi, who loved the place so much.

And that is why they were willing to work with the Town. They donated the entire area of the day camp to the town (some 46 acres and all of the camp facilities and equipment) and they sold, and self-financed, some 88 acres of adjacent undeveloped land. This is truly a great facility and, in fact, I have been told that former Town Manager Daniel Ayer, who negotiated the deal, once told the Wasserman's that he considered acquiring Wasserman Park the crowning achievement of his professional life. I can certainly understand why he may have felt that way.

In order to make sure that the property retained its character, the agreement to purchase included a number of restrictions on its future use. In order to make sure that their daughter would forever be remembered, and associated with this place she loved, the following condition was included: "The Property is hereby designated in perpetuity as 'Wasserman Park,' in memory of Debbi Wasserman Bilowit. The (town) will conduct an annual cinema, television, theatrical or dramatic arts program or activity in memory of Debbi Wasserman Bilowit."

When I drive into the Park, I frequently think about that meeting with Rona, and how her love for her daughter and this camp came together to provide this wonderful place for our residents, and especially for the children. Hopefully, as the years go by, we can continue to make the Park and the Camp something that will honor the memories of Rona, Chic and Debbi.

Website Developed By feremy Shankle

E-mail your comments to Town Manager: Dean Shankle.

Send mail to Chuck Miller with questions or comments about this web site.

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