2800 words

ROUND THE CAMPFIRE
Reminiscences of Camp Waupaca
by Marc Ringel,1958-1966

My best friend, Jay Slutzky, who lived across Greenview street from me on Chicago's north side, went to camp the year before I did with his older brother Harvey, now called Scott. Jay's dad knew Joe Rosen. I begged my parents to let me go, but they said eight years old was too young to be away from home for eight weeks, so by the time Skipper arrived at our apartment the next winter with his portable slide show, I needed no selling. The slide I remember best was what he called a "natural light" portrait of kids sitting at a campfire, their faces lit by the flames. For the next ten years I would unsuccessfully try to duplicate that shot. Not one of the underexposed yellow-orange blurs survives in my archives.

I have one other recollection of Skipper's pitch. Dad asked about some sort of accommodation at the camp. Skipper answered with the story of a man who was going to reupholster the seats of his movie theater. When the upholsterer asked him what he wanted the seats covered in, velvet or cloth, the owner said, *"Touchases."* That's the only time I ever remember Skipper use Yiddish.

My folks shopped for me at Fields, following to the letter the official recommended packing list, including a black footlocker, multiple camp t-shirts, and cotton tape with my name printed, over and over, in blue. For weeks Mom spent her evenings cutting the tapes into individual name-tags and sewing them by hand onto every piece of clothing I owned, except for my parka.

Camp started about a week after school was out. We drove that morning to the Davis Street Station in Evanston. Dad stopped at a vending machine at the station and bought me about a dozen packs of Wrigley's gum, contraband at camp, our own little conspiracy. I hid the gum in the très cool combination battery/AC-powered radio my grandparents had given me to take to camp. In a small carry-on bag I hauled enough candy, books and little games to last an end-to-end trip on the Orient Express. I still have a photo I took out the train window of the new Milwaukee Art Museum, the most futuristic building I'd ever seen. As we arrived in Appleton Skipper made the announcement that he made every year, "If you were going to Eagle River, you'd still have x hours to go on the train." I don't remember the value of "x", but after about 2-1/2 hours on this train we'd all had it, so I imagined the x to equal around 12.

Next was a bus ride from Appleton, past Abe Cohen's Dairy Farm, to camp. Upon arrival, to my dismay, I found I'd been put in Cabin 2, based on my tender age. But Jay Slutzky was in Cabin 3. I spoke right up and was transferred to 3, which turned out to be fortunate because that was the summer that Cabins 1 and 2 burned to the ground. It was best of all worlds: I got to live in the same cabin as my best friend, see a real cool fire (an oxymoron, I know) and bring back a great story without being inconvenienced for a minute, except for an interrupted meal.

Here's the story of the fire from my 9 year-old's perspective. Another semi-peaceful supper in the mess hall. There's a stir. Somebody announces from the microphone that we need to evacuate because of a fire on camp

grounds. We file out, up the road, past cabins 1 and 2 which are pretty well consumed with fire by now. Gray-black smoke billows out the roof. Counselors, looking very brave and strong, rush by us hauling fire extinguishers, 20 gallon jerry cans, painted red and fitted with hand pumps, hoses and nozzles or commercial cylindrical jobs, also hand-pumped. In retrospect their efforts were akin to trying to put out a water-boiling Super-Duper Relay blaze with spit. We were told that the propane cylinders that stood outside the cabin's bathroom to fuel the water heater might explode so we were led across the ball fields to the gully, from which we peered over the edge, cheering as the fire trucks finally arrived. The firemen's job was basically to cool the embers, which smoldered a little until the next day. When later we combed through the black cinders we found little more than oxidized and charred metal cot frames and springs.

Back to my first day at Camp Waupaca in June 1958. We had a campfire that night. Skipper asked the campers to identify ourselves and declare whether we were a new or an old camper, adding an "old" for every year we'd been at camp. Of the hundred-or-so of us Steve Kuklin's and Larry Rosen's turns came up early. They were sitting next to each other, already tan because they'd been at camp for a week or two helping their dads to get it ready. Both declared themselves to be old, old, old, old, old, old, old, old campers. That's eight olds. I swore at that moment that I'd match their record. I actually made it nine seasons, but, much to my chagrin, the recitation of oldness ended in a year or two.

Steve and Larry were like Spin and Marty to me, the two leads in the Disney's "Adventures of Spin and Marty," set at the Triple R, a summer camp dude ranch for boys. Their exploits were serialized on "The Mickey Mouse Club," my favorite TV show. When I mentioned this to Larry and Steve at the 50th reunion, they asked me who was which. Larry was Spin, I think, because he was longer and lankier. But Steve was hardly like Marty Markham, who came from a rich family and even brought his own English butler, Perkins, to serve him at camp. But their athletic skill and rivalry were like their Disney counterparts'. I can still see them in a freestyle race up and back between the piers (which really used to be set further apart than they are today). Larry had a long, strong stroke. Steve a short, sprinter's attack. They finished in a dead heat.

That year my senior counselor was Wayne Towne. I believe he was early in his college career. Wayne, a Waupaca native, was unlike anybody this urban-born and bred boy had ever known. Since then I've lived in a Colorado town of just 2000 inhabitants and a full five years in the small Wisconsin town of Ripon, and still I've never known anybody like Wayne.

Wayne worked in the craft shop under Chuck Cooper. Once he announced at a meal, "Someone has been stealing Exacto knives from the craft shop." That expression became a leit motif for the summer. People greeted each other with, "Someone has been stealing Exacto knives from the craft shop," doing their best to limn how Sherlock Holmes would have sounded if he had grown up in Waupaca, Wisconsin.

Another repeating phrase that summer was a unison response to Skipper's frequent bad puns. We'd all say, loudly, "Skipper joke, Skipper joke, Ha! Ha! Ha!" The next year, as an old, old camper, I responded resoundingly with that phrase to one of Skipper's first puns and found I was all alone and on the receiving end of stare from the man himself. That was my first realization that, though laden with tradition, a large portion of camp culture and language was reinvented from year to year.

One year we had an epidemic of "stomach flu," in retrospect, staphyloccal food poisoning, probably from some dish that was improperly prepared or stored. The epithet, Camp WaupUca, mercifully had no reason to survive the intervening winter.

Responses to Skipper's count-off of kids for raising and lowering the flag during the next week (and wasn't he the best bugler, ever—except maybe for the guy in "The Naked and the Dead"), "You hire it; you lower it. You hire it; you lower it." For a few years, but not forever, the group would shout "RAISE IT" each time he said "hire it."

These rituals were conducted in the Rosen Bowl, where I learned to love flowers. Today that formerly sunny space is shaded with middle-aged trees. Joe created a terrace on two sides of the Bowl with rows of boulders and filled those terraces with all sorts of flowering plants. Some of the rocks were painted white and individually decorated in the craft shop by kids who wished to be immortalized for as long as the paint held up to the weather.

Joe supervised the nature class, which I didn't sign up for because "nature boys" were mostly considered nerds, the last thing I wanted to be. So I had to learn from these nerds or eavesdrop on Joe as he taught the names of the plants and how to tell a male from a female frog. (It has to do with elongated front digits, I think, which the male uses to grasp the female as he mounts her). My own obsession with sex was still a few years off. Many of my adolescent fantasies were vicarious experiences, lived through the rumored or imagined exploits of the counselors.

Barry Shanoff was my junior counselor in 1958. He was still in high school. Another they-broke-the-mold individual, Barry was a curmudgeon, even then, sort of a young old fart. His greatest claim to fame was that he could swim feet-first on his back, using only his feet, twiddling his thumbs over his abdomen to further emphasize the greatness of his unique skill.

Barry was one of several who would serve as role-models and even as the surrogate big brothers I so craved as the oldest child in my family. Let me thank Barry, whose yellow convertible stick-shift Corvair was the first car I ever tried to drive (I didn't even know what a standard transmission was until I got behind the wheel); Herb Beller, who could teach Haftorah, piano or guitar and was a master of the snappy comment; Hart Katz, who talked physics, metaphysics and girls with depth and insight; Harry Summers, a college tennis player who spent a whole season making me a tennis player; Alan Sorkin who taught me to water ski and bought Jeff, Marty and me our first beer, which we drank in the back seat of his convertible Bonneville, in the parking lot of the Casino, all three of us getting

drunk on one six-pack and Jeff almost slicing off a finger on the first pop-top we'd ever encountered; and Pete Friend, who really was the closest thing to the big brother I'd always wanted.

I cried once that first summer, after a fight with a kid. I don't remember who it was or what it was about. I swore then that I would try to get through the next season without crying even once. It took me a few more years to achieve that goal. Now, as a grownup, I wish I could cry more easily.

After the first year I wasn't sure I would return to camp. I had missed my parents a lot. Hadn't gotten through Intermediate Swimming yet. Barry Shanoff challenged me to come back. I took him up on it.

My second year was truly the beginning of my love affair with the camp. I earned both my Intermediate and Swimmer badges, became a Brave. The core of the group who were to become some of the best friends I'll ever have began that year, among them, Mitch Ex. The first time I ever heard his name was on my way to my first year at camp. There were several counselors sitting in a couple of facing seats (on the Northwestern you could turn seats around by flipping the back over). They were reading through the roster and remarked that we had a kid named Ex coming to camp. Mitch's dad, Mort, made great hay with his name (formerly Ochs). He had a twin brother. They called themselves Kleen and Kote, he said.

By our second year of camp, Mitch had become the first verse of Chuck Cooper's rendition of "Dem Bones Shall Rise Again," a call-response song he always got us to sing on the bus trip from Appleton to camp.

Cooper: "Over there sits brother Mitch."

Campers: "Dem bones shall rise again."

Cooper: "He will scratch and he will itch."

Campers: "Dem bones shall rise again."

Unison: "I know it brother. I know it brother. Dem bones shall rise again."

Next came brother Marc, who kisses girls in the park. A few years later we made that verse much more explicit, but didn't sing it on the bus.

When Marty Lack, from Fort-William/Port Arthur, Ontario (now Thunder Bay) joined our group, he and Mitchell became the Ex-Lack duo. Bobby Singer was with us for a few years. He was a multi-talented kid, able to fart on every downbeat of the "Anvil Chorus" and to insert the tip of his tongue into either nostril. Herb Sobel was another member. He was the nurse's son, brother to Inky, an unusual kid who could put his legs into a full lotus without using his hands and who would lick the sole of his shoe on a dare or a car tire for a nickel.

Alan Schaeffer led every skit-writing effort, turning them into full-blown musical comedy spoofs. His most memorable was a take-off of "Romeo and Juliet," called "Rhonda and Julius," set in the suburbs and featuring such songs as "Arriva Derci Rhonda," ("Say goodbye to Rhonda. Go hop on your red Honda.); "There's a Wound in My Thigh," ("Not too low and it isn't too high. Just a wound in my thigh, and I hope to Zeus I shouldn't die."); and "Let Me Fix Your Bandage," ("Let me make you smile. I've got some mercurochrome and other things I've brought from home. I'm very versatile.")

Jeff Denenberg came on board in 1960. In 1962 I was a cracking-voiced Sir Lancelot to Jeff's King Arthur in "Camelot", an extravaganza by Tomcheck, Lerner and Lowe. For an ironic touch, my brother Paul carried my satin train in the opening processional. The year before I had been in the Can-Can kick-line, next to Mark Kettler, in Tomcheck's first big production, "Cowboy Jones," based on Cole Porter's "Can-Can," which featured my much more talented brother, Paul, in the title role (which is why Wally had wrongly assumed that I could carry a tune when he cast me as Lancelot).

I did steal the laughs from a rec. hall full of parents in one performance of "Cowboy Jones" when the ribbon that held the two tennis balls in their correct position under my bodice slipped to my waist. I tried to support the balls with my forearm. One bobbled out the armhole of the velvet top and bounced across the stage. I picked it up on the second hop and replaced it, never missing a can-can step nor a smile.

By "Music Man," Tomcheck's third big production, I had been "promoted" to producer, which meant that I wasn't seen on stage. As producer I got to take a trip to Milwaukee to see Forrest Tucker in the leading role, along with Wally, Alan Schaeffer (whose performance rivaled Forrest Tucker's), and Jim Avery, who played Winthrop Paroo. We visited the high school where Wally taught in West Allis, tore apart the shipping crates that we found there with crow bars (great fun), and loaded the wood into a small trailer to bring back to camp for building our sets. Wally stepped on a nail and moaned and shivered all the way back to

camp. He made London broil and Bisquick biscuits for us at his apartment, an unimaginably sophisticated bachelor, as far as I was concerned.

Many other thespian memories float to the surface from the Camp Waupaca section of my brain: Adolescent Marty Lack, fashionably thin and six feet tall, wearing a dancer's jockstrap under a long green shimmery dress, silver sandals, a long, straight, black wig, makeup, big bust, slinking down a flight of about four stairs singing "Summertime" in falsetto; Paul Ringel, partly covered in a leopard skin caveman outfit, complete with long brown-haired wig and glued-on chest hair, screaming and swinging down from a tree on a rope; Alan Schaeffer doing the whole "Trouble" routine from "Music Man," skipping full tilt among the mess hall tables; finding myself on the receiving end of the raincoat-telescope for the very first "Big Stick, Little Stick, Little Twig" routine I ever almost saw.

The stories of theater at Camp Waupaca, of friends, swimming, campfire songs, adolescent longings, jokes, language, nature, the Blue-White war, cabin life, etc. go on and on and on. This is a small semi-random sampling of an endless storehouse that I want to thank hundreds of you for being part of. See you at the next reunion.