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Dirty Dan and his notorious gang use force to make Sassafraz Sal give up her saloon in "Cowboy Jones," an ambitious epic staged by boys at Camp Waupaca.

Camp Musicals Tap Theater in Boys' Blood

Summer Productions in Waupaca Region Even Put Youngsters in Female Roles

Journal Special Correspondence
Waupaca, Wis.—The hero stomped across the stage and burst into song, joined by the nasty villain and the hard boiled dance hall girl with the heart of gold.

What made the moment unusual was that the three actors were young campers learning the excitement of the theater at Camp Waupaca for Boys. The hero was 9 years old, his co-stars 11.

They were giving a performance of "Cowboy Jones," one of the summer productions put on by Wallace Tomchek, 29, a Brookfield schoolteacher who tries to stimulate an interest in the theater in the 100 boys at the camp on Stratton lake.

The boys, ranging in age from 8 to 12, now are planning "Peter Pan."

Rehearsal Time Is Scarce

With so many activities, Tomchek says he is lucky if he can get the boys together for rehearsals. He starts production just three days before the performance, and rehearses the boys about six hours.

"About 99% of the boys like drama and music, and they catch on very quickly," Tomchek said. "I would have to class them as the most talented group for their ages that I've worked with."

A brief look into the background and experience of the trio who headed the cast of "Cowboy Jones" illustrates his point.

The young hero, Paul Ringel, just 4 feet 8 inches tall, shows the aplomb of a Gary Cooper. Paul, who is spending his first year at the camp, will enter fourth grade in Glencoe, Ill.

Sings With Choir

"Dirty Dan" swaggering across the stage was Jeff Denenberg, 11, of Chicago. Jeff, appearing in his fourth play in two years of camping, sings with the Mitzpah temple choir in Chicago.

With any triangle there has to be a woman and the lack of girl campers didn't stop the performance. "Sassafraz Sal" was Larry Schwartz, 11, of Elmwood Park, Ill. Larry, a first year camper, has been with the Jack and Jill Players in Chicago a year. There is brisk competition for the female roles.

The camp dramatics program got going five years ago. Tomchek took over in 1959 and has staged three plays each year since. At the start of the camping periods, each boy is given a vocal and voice test. This season, Tomchek had six boys who had participated in some type of children's acting group. Every camper participates in at least one production.

Boys Take Female Roles

The campers annually put on a Fourth of July production called "Colonial 76" and have done "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" and "Cinderella."

Next year they will stage "Camp-a-Lot" and "Carmen."

"Camp-a-Lot" will be patterned after the Broadway musical "A Chorus Line," page 8, col. 6.

Waupaca

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sical "Camelot." Tomchek often takes the music from a hit show and then composes new lyrics and plot to suit the group he is working with. "Cowboy Jones" used the music of the movie version of "Can Can."

With three acts, 11 numbers and a cast of 30 it gave ample opportunity for both group and solo work.

Sang in College Operas

Tomchek, who has an excellent tenor voice, sang in student operas at St. John's university, Collegeville, Minn., and at Eau Claire State college. He now sings with the Milwaukee cappella chorus.

With seven years of teaching in different grade levels, he has had an opportunity to develop flexible teaching methods. Last year, at Pilgrim Park junior high school in Brookfield, he produced Gilbert and Sullivan's "Trial by Jury." He has also taught at Barron, Waupaca and Waukesha.

A pianist, he accompanies the cast in the camp musicals. He holds a bachelor's degree in music education from St. John's, took graduate work in languages at Boston college, and had summer music and drama workshop experience in his hometown of Eau Claire.

Camp Waupaca started in 1951 on a 72 acre farm. It attracts most of its campers from the Chicago area, but also has Wisconsin boys.