

Camp Fire USA celebrates 100 years

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McClatchy Newspapers

GRANBURY, Texas - In the humid heat of a summer midmorning, the kids at Camp El Tesoro are riding horses. They're learning archery and skimming rocks across the shallow water of a creek near Granbury and the Brazos River. It's quiet, peaceful, far removed from the sounds of cars and electronic gadgets. With a gentle breeze carrying children's happy shouts, it feels like a step back in time.

In a way, it is. The summer camp is one of Camp Fire USA's programs for youth, and Camp Fire children have been paddling canoes, building fires and learning to identify trees across the country for 100 years.

Campers still skim rocks and sleep in rustic cabins, but Camp Fire isn't the same quaint girls' group it was created to be back in 1910. It has opened its doors to boys. It has changed its programming to reach kids who are underprivileged, kids who have busy parents, families that need support. Songs and uniforms have taken a back seat to after-school programs and kindergarten readiness. As childhood has changed, this youth organization has evolved with it.

Camp Fire turns 100 this year, and close behind is the First Texas Council in Fort Worth, which was the first in Texas -and one of the first in the nation -when it was created in 1914. As the group celebrates, we take a look back at its first century. It's an organization full of history and tradition. But it has always been a bit ahead of its time.

For those of you who haven't checked in for 35 years, Camp Fire is no longer a group for girls. Those Camp Fire Girls peddling candy in their vests haven't been Camp Fire Girls since the 1970s, when the organization went coed. And the group offers -to girls and boys -programs that a 1910 world would never have anticipated.

But the founding of Camp Fire Girls was groundbreaking in its own way. The organization was started by a couple that wanted girls to have the same opportunities that boys enjoyed through the Boy Scouts.

Luther and Charlotte Gulick created Camp Fire Girls the same year that the Boy Scouts of America was formed. As Charlotte Gulick told The New York Times in 1912, boys had always had access to plenty of organized activities -but "girls have had nothing of the sort."

"Boys have many things to do," she said, but "few new things have been worked out for girls, while so many of the old activities have lost their usefulness, and, therefore, their magic."

The Gulicks wanted to give girls a chance to learn skills, to work in groups and to build character. Girls formed groups, checked off a list of goals and challenges, and earned recognition for "handwork, home work, entertaining, sports" and more. The "Law of the Camp Fire Girls" was as follows: "Seek beauty. Give service. Pursue knowledge. Be trustworthy. Hold on to health. Glorify work. Be happy."

The skills required to be a Camp Fire Girl included "mend a pair of stockings" and "commit to memory any good poem or song," but they also required girls to know how to handle basic medical emergencies and "to know the career of some woman who has done much for the country or state."

"Before women were even able to vote, Camp Fire was encouraging young girls to take leadership roles, to serve their communities," says Geri Elsen, vice president of program and council services for Camp Fire USA at its headquarters in Kansas City, Mo.

The organization stayed much the same for its first few decades. But after World War II, as American life began to change, so did American childhood. Camp Fire changed right along with it.

Zem Neill, who didn't participate in Camp Fire as a child but who has been president and CEO of Camp Fire's local First Texas Council since 1978, has seen the organization evolve.

"If you were a Camp Fire Girl in our traditional program in 1950, you might look at the program today and really wish it looked the same as it did when you were involved," she says. "But how many things look the same in 2010 as they did in 1950? I think the organization has responded to that, and that's one reason we're still around."

Although Camp Fire's earliest programs were designed to teach "the real art of home making," by the 1950s, it was doing much more. Ginger Lawhon of Fort Worth, a Camp Fire Girl in the 1950s, remembers sewing projects. But she also remembers water sports and swimming challenges. She remembers candy sales as a lesson in business, teaching her how to sell her product and handle transactions.

"Girls at that time learned how to keep up with money, how to approach people to sell a product, to be courteous -and it was competitive," Lawhon says.

Lawhon's generation was, perhaps, the last of the old-fashioned Camp Fire Girls. By 1960 - two years before Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," 10 years before the first Earth Day - the organization began to focus on conservation and the environment. Camp Fire marked its 50th anniversary with a tree-planting campaign called "She Cares ... Do You?" Camp

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Fire Girls planted 2 million trees across the country and raised awareness about conservation. The project earned a commemorative stamp from the U.S. Postal Service.

Now that environmentalism is a primary issue, Camp Fire is even more determined to help kids understand and care about the environment, says Jane Lovedahl, director of curriculum development for the First Texas Council's outdoor education program.

And to really understand and care about the Earth, she says, "they must experience the natural world."

Kids spend increasing amounts of time interacting with (or just gazing at) a screen, and, well, it's harder for most children to spend time exploring the outdoors.

In the 1970s, Camp Fire took its biggest leap forward and made a change that would alter the name and the very identity of the organization: The 65-year-old group went coed. American life was changing, and Camp Fire wasn't going to be left behind.

"There were more mothers going back to work, more single-parent families," Elsen says. Schedules were busier, so all children needed programs to help them bond with and learn from their friends.

"The leadership of Camp Fire," Neill said, "felt that children needed the opportunity to relate to each other in social settings and learn leadership together."

The inclusion of boys was a little slow, but today, 35 years later, participation is roughly half-and-half.

The change altered Camp Fire's identity, if not its soul. The Camp Fire image - all those fresh-faced girls in their uniforms - would never be the same. But Camp Fire's decision to go coed made a statement: This organization would stay relevant by including and adapting, not by hanging onto the past.

"Our generations are different," Elsen says. "Think about Generation X and this next generation. ... Think about how quickly youths' interests change - different technology, different interests, different ways of work. If we are going to serve each generation effectively, we have to stay on top of those trends."

For all its progress, Camp Fire has kept a fairly low national profile. Many people still confuse Camp Fire with the Girl Scouts.

In fact, Camp Fire's new national CEO came from the Girl Scouts organization. Cathy Tisdale started her new job in June after three years as a Girl Scouts vice president. She, too, has been asking the question: What makes Camp Fire different from the Scouts and other youth organizations?

Tisdale's conclusion: It's the diversity of the population Camp Fire serves.

"All organizations say they strive to be diverse and represent the diversity of the community they serve," she says. "And all organizations say they want to be inclusive. But it strikes me that the history and the tradition of Camp Fire is particularly observable in that way."

Camp Fire was never racially segregated, and it has never been affiliated with any religion or political movement. But instead of merely allowing children of different backgrounds to join, Camp Fire has actively sought out diversity, offering programs for kids of all races and economic levels.

In 1952, before the civil rights movement, even before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Camp Fire Girls drafted a statement calling for more diversity and more inclusiveness in its membership. By the mid-60s, the group was offering programs that targeted girls in low-income homes. In the late 1960s, Camp Fire Girls began to develop after-school programs, starting with some trial programs in Chicago.

"We knew that, to be able to reach children in urban settings and inner-city developments, we could not go in with traditional programming that was not attractive to them," Tisdale says. "It was not appropriate (and) it was not convenient."

So after-school programming was born. If there wasn't an adult who could volunteer to lead a group, Camp Fire worked to find and train a leader. Meetings were offered at schools instead of homes. Those experiments in the 1960s eventually grew into an established after-school program at councils nationwide. Today, the majority of Camp Fire programs are after-school sessions designed to give kids enrichment and a safe place to spend afternoons.

As time goes by, Camp Fire looks less and less like the girls' club of 100 years ago. And that's a good thing, says Lawhon, who is a former Camp Fire board member and council president.

Lawhon's two daughters were Camp Fire girls, but by the time they joined in the 1980s and 1990s, the organization was coed. Her daughters had a rich experience, but it wasn't exactly like hers.

"As with everything," she says, "people say, 'Things aren't the way they used to be.' But it just doesn't work that way now."

Ann Sheets, the First Texas Council's senior vice president of administration and finance, recalls the story of a girl who was spending the night at El Tesoro for the first time. Far away from the city lights she was used to, Sheets says, the girl looked up at the night sky and murmured, "So this is where they keep the stars."

Camp Fire USA enters its second century with a firm hold on its past. And a finger on the pulse of the future, working to stay one step ahead of whatever might come.