

HISTORY of SURPRISE LAKE CAMP

Dedicated to
My Wife, Children, and
Grandchildren

JACK HOLMAN

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Surprise Lake Camp

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EARLY HISTORY

THE BIBLE explicitly states that he who aids one human being saves the whole world and has lived a life worthwhile. Personally, I have been privileged to help a goodly number of young people, and as I look back through my octogenarian years, I am now in my 88th, I am content. I would not like to grow younger I would like to grow older and to continue to enjoy the spiritual dividends which abound for persons who unselfishly share their worldly goods with the other half of the population. All who have dedicated themselves to work for Surprise Lake Camp have beautified their lives.

Actually, the camp came to life in 1902, started by the Educational Alliance, an establishment of the Lower East Side of New York City, operating as a combination for social, religious, and welfare activities in what is now known as a Settlement or Community House. The sponsors of this institution gave birth to an idea to complement the social phase for the young people of its community. The plan was to provide a partial summer vacation for young boys of the neighborhood, to acquaint them with the great outdoors in a wholesome and beautiful atmosphere away from home. For boys who lived in a congested tenement house area, ghetto-like, a change to the green fields amid trees would indeed be a welcome novelty. With this thought in mind, three of the club leaders of the Alliance set about to find a suitable place to be used for summer camping. In their search, they came to Cold Spring and landed at Surprise Lake. These men were Bernard M.L. Ernst, James Frank, and Ferdinand Kuhn. The Alliance representatives, having found a spot at Surprise Lake, rented the territory for one year to experiment, with an option to buy. Accordingly, the summer of 1902 began a new era in settlement social work with the advent of a summer camp. Boys were accommodated for two-week periods at a nominal cost of three dollars for the two weeks, which included transportation. The New York Central Railroad cooperated by charging a reduced fare to a non-profit organization engaged in a meritorious cause. Thus began the Alliance camp which in later years changed its name to Surprise Lake Camp. That story will be unfolded as the history of the camp proceeds to be told.

The 1902 camp experience appeared to be satisfactory and the Alliance leadership decided to buy the property to be used as a permanent camping site for its members. The purchase was made in the 1903 summer and permitted the experiment of the previous year to continue and a new era in settlement work became a permanent feature of Alliance activity.

The records show that the Educational Alliance made the purchase of the property from William O. and Catherine Jaycox on June 1, 1903, for the sum of \$2,125.00, and the deed was recorded in the Putnam County Clerk's office on June 15, 1903. A copy of the original deed recording the transaction is herewith appended.

In time, additional purchases from the Adams Estate by the Eddie Cantor Camp Committee and a grant of land from the Stern family enlarged the parcel to be used for camp purposes.

At the beginning, the kitchen and the dining room were out in the open air, under the direction of Mrs. Bloomer. She and her husband, Leonard Bloomer, and their children lived in a farmhouse on the premises. While Mrs. Bloomer cooked the meals, Mr. Bloomer did the physical work which the camp required. Mr. Moses, a club leader at the Educational Alliance, undertook to run the camp during the summer. Other club leaders of the Alliance who followed as camp directors were: Bernard M.L. Ernst, James Frank, and Ferdinand Kuhn, who took turns in supervising the camp. Mr. Ernst was succeeded for a short time by David Krashes, and in turn by Morris Berk and Dr. E.L. Krackowizer.

E.L. Krackowizer and Morris Berk were the heads of the Boys' Club Division at the Educational Alliance. Both spent summers directing the Alliance camp in the years 1910, 1911 and 1912. At one time Morris Berk organized a camp club of boys who had been at the camp. This club held regular meetings at the Educational Alliance. The club consisted of young men who had at one time or another spent their summer vacations at the camp. Max (Hippo) Schulman was the president of the club. In due time the Camp Club built a stone wash house at the lake front, adjacent to a flowing mountain spring, close to where the Eddie Cantor Playhouse was constructed in later years. The wash house being close to the spring enabled campers to fill their basins for washing instead of dipping them in the lake for water. This same building is now being used as a

nature hut at the camp. A plaque on the building erected by the Camp Club at that time reads: "Cleanliness Is Next to Godliness."

The Camp Club was active in doing its bit for the camp in its day. When Max (Hippo) Schulman died in 1931, the Eddie Cantor Committee erected a drinking fountain in his memory, at the camp baseball field.

Just as from little acorns giant oaks grow, so Surprise Lake Camp from a humble beginning of six tents housing 25 campers and five counselors now numbers more than one hundred structures, tents, tentalows, and a variety of buildings accommodating eight hundred and fifty people, including six hundred campers and two hundred and fifty staff members, counselors, kitchen help, grounds people, waiters, porters, administrative help, doctors, nurses, and office workers.

In the early days, the author became acquainted with the camp, as a counselor in 1903 and 1904. Part of his acquaintance was made with a young boy by the name of Eddie Cantor, who was one of the poor boys of the East Side, sent to the camp by the Educational Alliance. Cantor happened to be able to entertain, and at camp fires he entertained. This young boy was known as Happy Cantor because he usually dressed in overalls and when entertaining put a tin can on his head as a token of that particular era when the Happy Hooligan series appeared in the comic section of the daily newspapers, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the tin can on his head, Eddie represented Happy Hooligan, and in camp he was called "Happy" Cantor, and because Cantor was a pretty good entertainer, everyone liked him, and instead of the two weeks to which he was entitled, he was kept over for an extra week because of his special ability, and he entertained at all camp fires during his stay at camp.

Camp fire entertainment, at night, under the stars was a thrilling experience for the novitiate from the ghetto environment of the Lower East Side. It left permanent images and created lasting friendships. The recreational facilities consisting of baseball games, swimming, and boating provided the daytime activities. Basketball, tennis, and other athletic events had not yet in 1903 and 1904 made an appeal to the youngsters of the day. Consequently, the camp

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program was limited in scope, with the emphasis on body building and social life which a short two-week vacation would permit. Of course, the philosophy of camping has since outgrown its formative years and a broad plan of physical, social, educational, and religious activities is an everyday product of current camping, planning, and performance.

The bi-weekly trips to camp were a unique experience. The train stopped at a small station called Storm King, just a little above Cold Spring. From the station, campers and staff were obliged to walk three and a half miles on the Breakneck Road of the Breakneck Ridge, a stony road, with baggage and everything else until they arrived at camp. In later years when trains stopped at Cold Spring and the walk up Breakneck Road became impossible, we took the roundabout road through Nelsonville, for six miles from the village of Cold Spring up to the camp. By then a truck assisted in hauling the baggage to camp.

In the days of the steam locomotive, the New York Central Railroad had water rights to draw off the water from all the lakes along the line. That included Surprise Lake, where the water was tapped from the dam at the westerly end of the lake adjacent to the present girls' swimming dock and dining room and piped into the trough between the tracks all along the line. The locomotive sucked up the water to propel the train of coaches to its destination. This happened early every year and caused the camp authorities anxiety as to whether or not there would be enough water in the lake at camp time for swimming and boating. Fortunately, the underground springs and the mountain streams replenished the supply of water and we were able to survive the annual draining by the New York Central. When the electric engine replaced the steam locomotive the water scare was permanently removed and the annual anxiety ended.

Somewhere the story is told of the origin of the name Breakneck Road. A cow trudging up the rocky path fell and broke its neck—hence the name.

It is interesting to note the origin of the name Cold Spring. At the railroad station there is a tablet on which is engraved the information which tells about its name. General George Washington is said to have stopped at this spot, took a drink of water from a cold spring and remarked—"My, what a Cold Spring!"

George Sokolsky, a famous columnist, a former camper during this period, subsequently wrote about his camping days at the Alliance camp as follows: *For us, there was joy in the discovery of new worlds and the camp on Surprise Lake was something never to be forgotten. We slept in tents and ate in a pavilion and had to do the chores, and at night we sat around a camp fire, singing songs. And perhaps we were a little afraid of the darkness and quiet and the hoot owl because we were accustomed to city noises. It was this camp that had the most profound significance on my life and I know what it did for Eddie Cantor, a tubercular little boy who slept in a cellar. It made him a philanthropist because Eddie's work has been to keep this camp growing and expanding. Eddie has never forgotten the day we took the train up to Cold Spring—far from the East Side and we saw our first snake and caught our first catfish.*

George Sokolsky writing for the Herald Tribune on August 10, 1936, under the title "I Rise to Protest" had this story about Surprise Lake Camp and Eddie Cantor. *"Now the truth of the matter is that I have seen the country long before Pitkin invited me to his chicken farm. In fact, I have seen it several times. Very early in my life, long before I had ever heard of Pitkin, when I was a small boy on the East Side, I was given a vacation at the Educational Alliance Camp at Surprise Lake." I believe it was the first year that the camp was opened and the grounds were farmery. There was a long open air pavilion where we ate and a kitchen where we took turns to wash dishes. There were no dieticians and no camp counselors and no auto buses. These things were to come when camps became more civilized. Ours was a rough and tumble place and we slept in tents. The head of the camp was Bernard M.L. Ernst who specialized in collecting snakes. He was lots of fun, but he had an unholy penchant for making small boys clean their teeth—a swagger custom to which we had not heretofore been introduced.*

There was a hole in the ground and we filled it with wood, and in the evening we would sit about the camp fire singing, reciting, telling stories. Izzy Iskowitz (or maybe he did not know how to spell it himself) used to be quite a star among us. He had his own teeth then, but his eyes bulged and popped. Somehow we switched even in those days to his grandmother's name, and we nicknamed him "Happy" Cantor. His big ears made him look like Happy Hooligan, a character in the funnies.

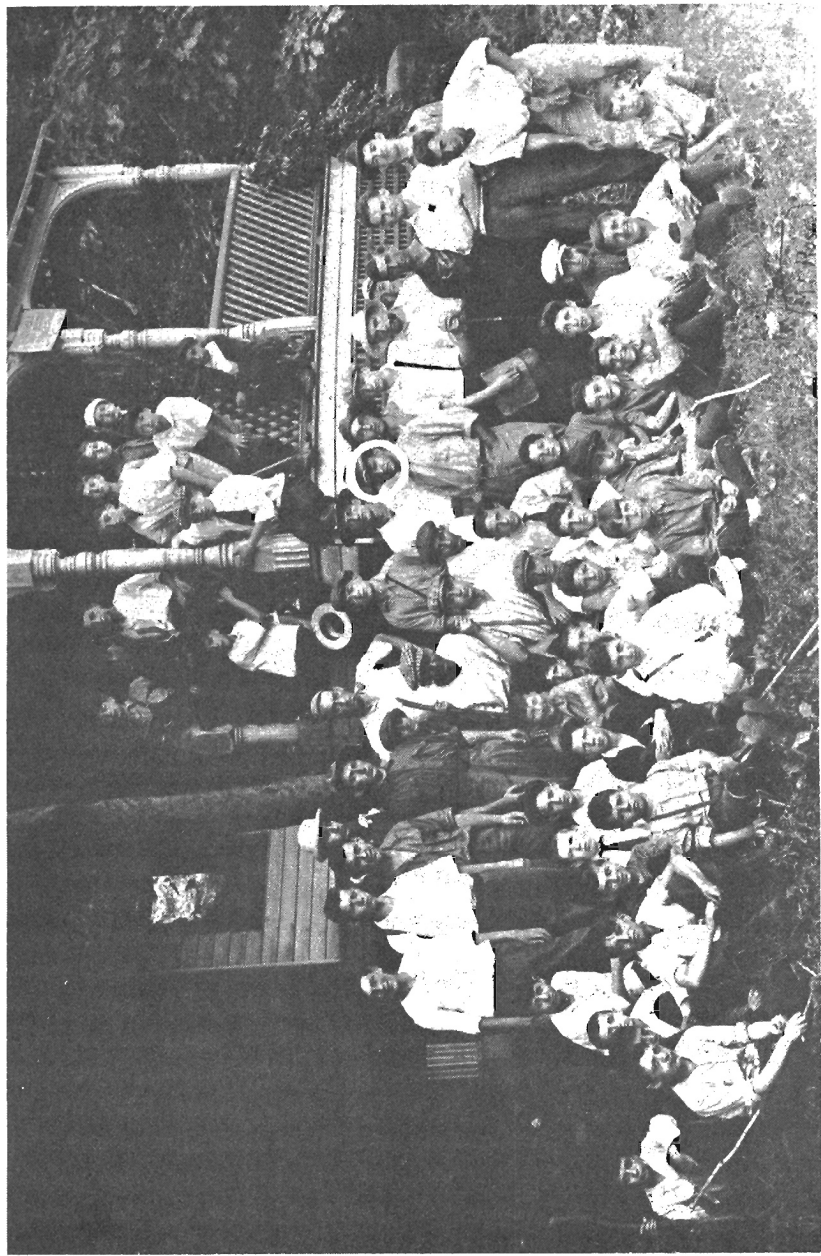
"Happy" Cantor needed the camp more than most of us did because he lived in a basement on East Broadway and had very little access to sunlight. But most of us knew the sun only because it was hot in the summer. Green grass we knew, too, because sometimes we got as far as Central Park, and there the grass was green. Or, maybe we went to a lodge picnic, and there was some grass there—but no big trees, and no lake, and no fishing, and no hiking in the woods, and no snakes. These things we did not know before.

We had good times there but we could not stay at the camp too long because other boys had to come. If I remember correctly, Eddie Cantor was allowed to remain over because his legs were so thin.

In 1907, the tents were replaced by a long bunkhouse divided into three sections named "Kuhn," "Frank," and "Ernst." Electricity was installed, facilities added, and a senior camp established on the other side of the lake. During the period of 1902-1910, all the campers came from the Educational Alliance. The boys came in club groups.

About this time, the Y.M.H.A. had a mishap at its summer camp at Plum Island. Since they needed an area for camping, and since the Educational Alliance had this great big spot, some two hundred acres at Surprise Lake, the Y.M.H.A. was invited to share the area. In 1911, the camp was thus enlarged and became known as The Alliance—Young Men's Hebrew Association Camp.

The Y.M.H.A. division was built on the north side of the lake. This part of the camp opened its doors to adult young men between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five. A vacation opportunity was offered to the campers in this section, to the young people who wanted to spend a week or two weeks at Surprise Lake Camp, at the rate of \$7.00 a week. Actually it was called the Senior Camp. Their activities during the day consisted of a variety of athletic events, such as baseball, track, hiking, swimming, and boating. Evenings, social events took place in a building on the hill known as the White House. The program varied each evening; one night it would be boxing, carefully supervised so that no one was injured or unduly punished. Another evening there was pillow fighting by contestants on gymnasium horses. A third night was devoted to an outdoor camp fire of songs and stories. One of the nights was for the talent show, or as it was then called *Amateur Night*. The boys displayed their histrionic talents which in the main became interpretations of the ethnic



Jack Holman leads a group on a hike to Mt. Beacon, N.Y., circa 1917

groups of the day—the Irish, the Italian, and the Jewish characters. The performers had a flair for derogatory dialects in imitation of the vaudeville actors of the day, a popular form of entertainment. The author, who was at the time social director of the camp and supervised the Senior Camp evening activities, regarded this type of humor as perverted and banned racial character portrayals of all kinds. This taboo turned the talents of the young men into embryo song writers which resulted in two famous camp songs which have come down to us throughout the years.

One of the interesting day activities was hiking. Large groups indulged. Trips were made to West Point to view the cadets, evening mess parade, to George Washington's headquarters at Newburgh (now a museum), and a climb to Mt. Beacon through trails in the woods. At the top of Mt. Beacon there is a plaque on the monument on which is inscribed the information that here fires were set during the Revolutionary War as signals to the commanders of Washington's headquarters in Newburgh, on the opposite side of the Hudson River.

Originally, when the Y.M.H.A. joined, a Mr. William Mitchell, executive director of the "Y," was the camp administrator. Leon Katzenstein, who succeeded him, was the executive director of the Y.M.H.A. between camp seasons. He was a capable administrator, a kindly person with a ready smile, a gentleman who was loved and respected by all who knew him. At camp he was easily disturbed by unthinking senior campers who violated the regulations. In fact, he was often irascible with offenders and called on his right hand man, George Schoening, for preemptory action. The offenders may have been scaling a balustrade to enter the dining room instead of using the outdoor stairway. Or, after taps the group of hazers had doubled up the linens (frenched), or poured water on the mattresses, or placed stones under the pillows of new campers. In any event, the punishment was immediate dismissal from the camp regardless of the hour, a harrowing situation for all concerned.

George Schoening was the athletic director of the Y.M.H.A., in which capacity he served during summers at camp. He was a powerful man, physically, and commanded the respect of the senior campers. Periodically, he gave a demonstration on the lake by hauling in a strong swimmer with rod and reel. And, old timers were awed by his daily "Rise and Shine" which followed the morning bugle call of reveille.

Robert B. Brodie, one-time social coordinator of the Educational Alliance, and later its president, composed the third part of the triumvirate until he was succeeded by the author of this tale.

The disciplinary methods of Katzenstein and Schoening had to be corrected—but how? On an evening hazing incident the author took over with the consent of Katzenstein and Schoening. The experiment was successful and a new era in camp management ensued. Specifically, a group of twenty young men who were involved were directed to get dressed and to report on the baseball field. There a confession was called for with no response. Those accused held a conference and came up with a proposition. Since all were not the guilty ones, they indicated those who had no part in the hazing and confessed that six of the group were more or less the instigators and leaders. The writer congratulated the six on their honesty and left it to them to administer the punishment. Again, after a huddle, the six decided that, since they had interfered with the sleep of the campers hazed, it would only be fair that their sleep, too, should be interrupted, and they decided to sleep on the ballfield which they did after collecting their pillows and blankets. Needless to add, it rained during the night and the writer went to the ballfield at 4:00 A.M. and lifted the self-imposed punishment, and the boys went back to camp to finish the night's sleep.