

HISTORY OF CAMP VEGA

Organized camping was created and founded in the United States and Canada in the earlier part of last century. Many educators and social workers across the eastern seaboard of the United States shared a vision to create an idyllic, communal environment for children, especially living in dense, urban cities. Many Jewish family immigrants yearned for their children to experience the same fresh air, clean lakes and fields as they had enjoyed growing up. There were also health risks in populated cities, such as contacting polio from public water places that were unsafe, motivating parents who could, to send their child to a summer sleep away camp.

Camp Vega founders, Ruth (Steiner) Cohen and George Cohen of Bethesda, Maryland established Camp Vega in 1936. Two parcels of land on both sides of 'Crotched Pond', later named, 'Echo Lake', were purchased.

As educators, they were eager to run a camp community that provided children life skills in a recreational, natural environment. Traditions such as Camp Vega's Sunset Circle were conceptualized, becoming an integral part of the camp's identity. Each camper and cabin were encouraged to participate in thematic topics such as appreciation, responsibility, compassion, integrity and sportsmanship. Senior Camp campers also had Sunday Morning Assembly, a venue enabling young women to partake in the discussion of current and world news events and voice commentary on various issues of the day.

Some of these social workers and teachers acquired land and founded the camps as camp directors. Also, early camp families living in Baltimore, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati (to name a few) sought to provide their children an experience in a wooded setting with lots of fresh air in a wholesome, natural setting, much like they experienced growing up as a child in Europe.

In the early days, the girls traveled via railway to Readfield Depot, located about 12 miles from the front entrance of Camp Vega. The first year, 1936, had an enrollment of 37 campers, with some boys that were present the first year. In subsequent years, Camp Vega remained a girls' camp.

The program at Vega had many different activities. The girls were introduced to such sports as boating, swimming, tennis and horseback riding. The art program was very involved and the girls' skills were highly developed in the areas of pottery and intricate craft projects. Outdoor Adventure was also popular. The camp offered a challenging Junior Maine Guide program for senior girls which required a three-day trek in the wilderness of Maine, cutting timber and utilizing survival skills. On the campus, there was a garden on the hill by Vega's arts and crafts building. In the 1940's, campers planted and tendered crops of vegetables and corn to be sold raising money for the war effort overseas.

Community Service was also part of the camp program. Good works were seen in the areas of local and national charities such as UNICEF and assisting in the painting of the Fayette

Library. In 1953, Matt and Mary Penn, social workers from New York City, purchased Camp Vega. In the mid-sixties, the western shore of Echo Lake was used for the girls, ages 13 – 15. The eastern shore, which had the campus in Mt. Vernon, was developed for junior campers, ages, 7 – 12. For a decade, Matt would run the older girls' camp on the Fayette side of Echo Lake and Mary ran the junior camp on the Mt. Vernon side of Echo Lake. This was an exhausting task for parents of three girls who were running what was now becoming a huge enterprise. They eventually decided to sell the junior side of camp in 1963. The land in Mt. Vernon was sold to educators Mel and Betty Archard from New Paltz, N.Y. and the younger aged children moved to the older girls' campus site which is now Camp Vega. At the Fayette site, many new cabins were erected at this time and the dining hall expanded to provide for the additional campers.

In 1975, Matt Penn was looking to transition out of the camp industry. His wife, Mary, had passed away seven years earlier and Matt decided it was the right time to move on. Dick and Linda, while working at Camp Waziyatah for Girls, heard of a camp that might be for sale. Both were keenly interested in entering the field of residential camping. Finding a camp that was for sale was rare. Soon plans were set in motion to purchase Camp Vega. They co-directed with Matt Penn and head counselor, Ellen Greaves familiarizing themselves with the camp's rich traditions and program.

As full directors in 1976, the Courtisses began their plans to expand Camp Vega. Girls' camps at the time lacked the higher athletic standards that boys' camps were offered. Dick and Linda tried to correct this inadequacy by hiring more skillful coaches and building fields, such as the soccer field and baseball field and dugouts. Intra and Inter camp sports with area girls' camps were also introduced. In 1978 a gymnasium, 'Tumbledown' was built to meet the interests of girls and dance studio and more team sports such as basketball and soccer. Dick Courtiss had camp experience in the Adirondacks at Camp Arcady, where he keenly observed plant development of fields and cabins. Dick also had a sports background in football and his passion for athletics spearheaded a drive to raise the quality of the athletic program at Vega. Arthur Dean of Mt. Vernon was hired as Head of Building and Grounds and Tiger Hewett of Fayette to be Assistant of the development projects ahead. These two men built most all of the buildings of the camp. This included a huge health center of 3,800 square feet built in 2004. In the sports area, two fields were also added for soccer, softball and lacrosse. An additional dance studio, art studio, and a new theatre were also erected. Ski slalom courses and a ski jump were added and an equestrian center. Later, in the eighties, a Ropes Challenge Course was built. A hiking and biking trail in the Vega Outback was also introduced along with the popular game, 'GaGa' enjoyed by all age groups. Two years ago, an additional twenty-two acres were added to Vega's three hundred acre campus. The waterfront property, now called Vega Point, increased Vega's shoreline to a two mile stretch and is used for nature and camping outings.

Aside from increasing the physical plant of the operation, Dick and Linda remained true to the basic philosophy and values of camping: Enabling girls to attain a productive and enriched life in the areas of resourcefulness, integrity, compassion and self-expression. Linda continued to direct Their son, Kyle, and daughter-in-law, Emily, Co-Directors, now join Linda in her commitment to run an excellent, traditional Maine camp.