

Watson Lake camp fosters memories of good food and fun | Yukon News

WATSON LAKE

The name Hidden Lakes is magic to the children of Watson Lake. It conjures images of fun, food and friends.

For the last 35 years, for two weeks a summer, this Bible camp has provided the kids of the community with the time of their young lives.

When the application forms become available the excitement begins, and it builds until the bus discharges the eager campers on the site.

They know from either their own previous experiences or, for first-timers, from the stories told by past participants that they are about to enjoy a week of activities, great meals and, most importantly, young adult friends who are there to play with them and teach them.

Jim and Ruth Holt have been involved from the beginning of the Hidden Lakes Bible Camp, though they credit Gordon Gruchy with the idea and the ceaseless push to make it happen.

Gruchy was a missionary in Watson Lake; he was with the Northern Canada Evangelical Mission, and one of his firm beliefs was, "Every kid needs to go to camp."

Some of the Watson Lake families had tried the Marsh Lake summer camp, but, "It was an eight-hour drive in those days and the road wasn't that great," says Ruth.

"Also, we didn't have the vehicles to take a lot of kids with us. We agreed, with Gordon, that summer camp was a great thing for kids, so when Gordon kept on about it, Jim and I, and Sheila and Ron Frank got on board with the idea."

The little group agreed one of the prerequisites was that the camp had to be a wilderness experience.

With this in mind, they settled on Hidden Lakes. At 70 kilometres, it was far enough from town, but not so far they couldn't handle the going back and forth that would be necessary during the camp weeks.

The first camp was in 1976 and it has gone on without interruption and with few changes, bringing a wealth of new and positive experiences to a group of children who otherwise are not likely to have the opportunity of summer camp.

They have stayed mostly true to their wilderness mandate; although they finally relented on the matter of a generator for power to the kitchen, and running water for the kitchen, the camp is still primitive. The cooking is done on a wood stove - meals to feed about 100 people are prepared throughout the two weeks of camp - and it is all whipped up by volunteers.

"We started with tents," says Jim. "All the cooking was done on an open fire, and the dining was under tarps. Then we moved to tent frames. The 10 cabins came along when some of the Yukon churches closed; we moved the buildings to our site. We built the kitchen and the dining hall, and moved the chapel indoors. The camp is as basic as we can hope for, and we've resisted the pressure to get bathrooms; the outhouses

are still in use.”

“No iPods,” Ruth says, “No electronics of any kind. The kids may make a movie as part of a camp activity, but there is no TV or DVD watching at camp. Some of the kids complain at first, but in no time at all they are too busy to miss those things.

“The counsellors now do all the programming, and it is fantastic. We have a huge craft tent, and there is archery, canoeing, a zip line, drama, field games, and swimming every day. They are so busy that during the mandatory after-lunch hour of ‘bums on the bunk’, many of them fall asleep.”

“There are chores, too,” Jim says, “The kids, with their teams, have daily camp work to do. They haul wood for the cooks, they do dishes, they sweep and mop the floor in the dining room, and they clean the yard.”

No summer camp is complete without a tuck shop on the grounds, and this camp is no exception. Each child is allowed one candy bar and one soda pop each day. The cost is now included in the camp fee, thus negating the former issue of some campers having more financial resources than others.

The fee for the camp was \$55 for years, but recently rose to \$80, with church and community members sponsoring those whose families are unable to cover the cost. No application is turned down.

The camp is divided into two sessions, the first five days for teens, Grade 8 to 12, and the second six days is for kids aged 8 to 12. There are about 65 kids for the second session, with the teen camp attendance sometimes registering several campers and some years none.

The young adults, those 20 counsellors, are critical to the camp experience. Not only do they plan the program of activities, but part of their commitment to the kids is to keep in touch with each and every member of their ‘team’ through letters or e-mail.

And they do, creating relationships that last long after the camp week and lend a great deal to the perspective of the kids whose lives they touch.

“The counsellors compete to come to our camp,” says Ruth. “And they do all their own fund raising. They love our kids, and they love the wilderness aspect of our facility. Every year, when the bus pulls into the site, there is a sort of hush that comes over the passengers.”

The bigger churches down south have gotten more and more involved over the years of this camp, helping out with raising money year round. It is the Willow Park church youth who for the last 15 years have provided the staff of counsellors.

“They are amazing young people,” Ruth says, “They are so energetic, and so truly engaged with our kids, helping them to maximize their time at camp. The kids confide in them; they trust them, and for some it is the first and only time they have such a relationship. “

It is impressive that in 35 years there have been only three occasions where a child had to be taken home due to lack of co-operation, or simple inability to manage the scene.

The counsellors and the camp directors, all the adults on the site, are dedicated to helping each and every child be the best they can be. The expectation is good and civil behaviour and everyone is there to help the child figure out how to achieve it.

It is equally impressive how every year the camp is cleaned up, maintained, and otherwise aided by volunteers, both church members and non church members. All the baking needed for the camp, hundreds of

cookies and squares, muffins and cakes, is done by townspeople.

The cooks have a massive job, cooking for a large number of people three times a day, all done on an old wood-burning stove. There is always a bit of a crunch come camp time with finding an adequate number of cooks. Sometimes the cooks arrive like a miracle.

“One year, we were getting close to camp time and were short of cooks. At a church service, I facetiously asked the minister to pray for cooks,” Ruth says. “A couple of women, passing through town and happening to attend our service, overheard me. They approached us to say they were not on a strict schedule with their holiday and would be happy to cook for our camp. We took them up on the offer, of course, and they were two of the best cooks we’d had; they knew all sorts of tricks with our old stove, and left us some recipes that are still used every year.”

Each and every camper interviewed for this story raved about the food, how good it was and how plentiful. There are baked hams with scalloped potatoes, roast turkeys with all the trimmings, lasagne, to name a few of the dinners provided.

Lunches feature soups, sandwiches - everything homemade. Bacon and eggs, cold and hot cereals, muffins, toast, pancakes are on offer for breakfast, with evening snacks also there to be devoured by kids who, in many cases, have never been so physically active.

“Some of these kids haven’t ever been fed like this,” Ruth says, “Some even have to be persuaded to try some of these ordinary dishes; they’ve not had them before. We’re really happy about being able to provide campers with so much good food.”

“About 90 per cent of the kids at our camp have never been church-ed,” Jim says, “It’s an opportunity to teach them something about religion, what it can mean to them. The basic theme is the gospel of Christ, taught through music, songs, stories and games. The stories and the music come from all over the world and are carried out throughout the week. A lot of lessons about geography, and history, for instance, are taught this way.”

Remarkably, after all these years of involvement with the camp, Ruth’s and Jim’s enthusiasm is still strong, evident in their animation and pleasure in talking about Hidden Lakes and what happens there for the kids.

They also express gratitude for the Watson Lake townspeople for continuing support, and they cannot say enough regarding the contribution of the young counsellors.

It is an inspiring story, this evidence of what can happen when a few people get together to make a dream a reality, and through their efforts and commitment draw in dozens and dozens of other people to continue to make it happen.

Tor Forsberg is a freelance writer based in Watson Lake.