

How Summer Camp Went From Urban Escape To Rich-Kid Refuge (By Kari Paul):

As a kid, every summer, I would look forward to the day I'd pack my bags to be dropped off at Camp Shalom, a Christian camp in the cornfields of Iowa. My fellow campers and I would sleep under the stars in the wilderness, learn how to make lanyards and friendship bracelets, and canoe on the lake for six glorious days a year.

Sleepaway camp was the highlight of my summer all the way into high school. But such experiences are increasingly unattainable for the average American kid. As a recent report from the New York Times explains, summer break in the US puts a major financial strain on many families. When school stops, working families and single-parent homes struggle to find affordable daycare options or summer camps to send their children to. According to the American Camp Association, the average day camp costs \$304 per week, while overnight camp tallies up at \$690 - far out of reach for a lot of low and middle-income families living paycheck to paycheck.

It wasn't always this way. Summer camps actually began with the goal of giving low-income urban children access to nature and fresh air while keeping them out of trouble when they were not in school. But over the years, they have become yet another means by which American society reinforces the cultural boundaries between children of the well-off and everyone else.

Some of the first YMCA summer camps emerged early as the 1880s and were initially only for boys, according to *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World*. Camp Dudley, one such YMCA camp, was founded in 1885 to create a "positive developmental experience through making new friends, building confidence and growing in self-reliance," offering a lot of the outdoor recreational activities we associate with modern day camp.

After the turn of the century, camps for girls were established by the Girl Scouts of America and Camp Fire Girls. And around World War I, a number of charity organizations founded summer camps for working-class children, meant to be a respite from the "moral and physical degradations" that the progressive movement at the time associated with urban life.

One of the largest of these was Camp Wel-Met, a non-profit founded by the Metropolitan League of Jewish Community Associations that housed up to 1,500 children per summer at its peak in the 1950's and 60's. Beyond keeping kids safe and under adult supervision, these camps were meant to teach independence, good sportsmanship, and community values while creating lifelong social connections across class and race boundaries.

But along with the for-profit camps, these non-profit have been on the decline since the 1980's. Reports show camps of all kinds are financially difficult to maintain, making such experiences available to a shrinking number of children.

According to Hilary Levey Friedman, sociologist and author of *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*, as nonprofit camps have declined, costly specialty camps have been of the rise. Parents want to enroll their children in camps that give them a leg up on college applications and "real world" skills, like programs in academics and the arts.

Today, parents have options like the International Riding Camp, where girls can practice cross-country jumping in between dining on organic food and taking water-skiing and tennis lessons. The camp costs \$20,000 for 10 weeks. One day camp in Long Island, NY, specializing in the arts, costs \$3,950 for a month. A month-long summer writing program at Emerson College for high-school students costs \$6,531.

The prohibitive cost of these camps, particularly those that are academic in nature, can have a profound effect of solidifying class boundaries amongst children.

“We still see some general camps for low-income children, but there has been a rise of the specialty camp, and a rise of elite schools that do summer programs for high school students,” Friedman said. “That just becomes yet another thing you ought to do to get into colleges, and when those cost a lot of money or you don’t know about them, that can reinforce socioeconomic boundaries.”

Indeed, we know that summer break can have major effects of children’s learning, with students losing several months of reading grade level each break that they are unlikely to gain back. The so-called “summer slide” contributes to the achievement gap between low and high-income students, making the time period crucial for academic programs. And even traditional camps bring a variety of benefits to children simply by virtue of getting them outdoors. Children who spend time in nature have been found to experience less aggression and increased happiness, focus and self-discipline.

Beyond academics and being outdoors, children who miss out on summer camp also miss out on strong bonds that help them later in life.

“In the same way you think of prep schools or colleges, camps begin to function in the same way,” Friedman said. “These instant connections that people make can lead to business deals, political donations, or non-profit donations. You begin to associate more with upper middle-class life.”

The activities of summer camp can also reinforce class divides, frequently focusing on upper-class hobbies like tennis, horseback riding, sailing, and golf. In this way, camps actively prepare children to socialize among the rich. And as many camps are religious in nature, children form early friendships and even romantic relationships with others who share their class demographics as well as spiritual and cultural values.

“Historically and today, there are religious based camps like church camp or different Jewish camps, so we see summer camps as both an opportunity and a constraint in building those boundaries,” Friedman said. “It solidifies in-group networks and weakens some of those out-group ties that you hope could happen as well.”

Some summer programs targeting low-income children, via LitWorld and other non-profits, do offer after-school and summertime academic programs that aim to keep low-income students on track with their more affluent peers. And not all camps today are reserved exclusively for the elite. The YMCA, responsible for the first camps in the US, does still offer affordable camps and financial assistance for low-income families. If the longest-standing camp in the US is able to include low-income children, maybe it is time for others to start doing the same - because all kids deserve a chance to cabin up with their peers.