

THE STORY OF CAMP WHIP O WILL

Back in the 1960's all the land on the North side of the Souhegan River from the Turkey Hill Bridge to Amherst along Wilson Hill Rd. belonged to the Gates family, who then lived in the white farmhouse near the bridge. The house had been an early home of Rev. Jacob Burnap, first minister in Merrimack in the 1700's. The flood plain near the river had been farmland for generations before, as is seen from the cherry trees, crabapple trees, shagbark hickory and creeping yew. The land is all sand, deposited by the river as it changes its path every year. It is frequented by many wild animals, which come through for access to the river: moose, deer, fox, river otters, turkeys, rabbits etc. Many geese, ducks and blue herons nest on the land across the river. Unfortunately, there are no longer Whip O Wills heard regularly.

Troop 15 was the only Scout troop in Merrimack at that time, and Jim Gates was the committee chairman. There were no Cub Scouts or Girl Scouts in Merrimack at the time. He split the land along Wilson Hill Rd. into lots and sold them for private homes, but the flood plain along the river was not suitable for building. The bend in the river at the end of Rivergate Rd. flooded regularly, but was great for the Scouts to camp. It was often used by Troop 15, back in the days when patrols camped without adults, hiked to the campsite and had no patrol gear to carry with them. It is a five mile hike from Town Hall to the camp and back.

When Mr. Gates, who was a pilot, decided to retire in Florida, he wanted this land to remain for the Scouts' use, so he set up a land trust for these 23 acres, and appointed five trustees: Bill Tinsch, Mr. French, Cox, Frank O'Gara, and Cliff Estes, who was the current chairman of Troop 15. Cliff Estes died in 2006, the last of those trustees. The trust document left the land to "Merrimack Scouts" (does not say Boy Scouts), but states that no permanent structure or trailer may be built on the land, and that if it is not used by Scouts for two years, it reverts to the Gates heirs. Troop 15 put up a sign and built a council ring. There was a lot of vandalism, and the neighbors acted as security. In return, one of them was allowed to keep their horses there during the week, and stored hay for their feed. They erected a barbed wire fence to enclose the horses and installed a gate. Fred Huber, who lives next to the gate planted trees along Rivergate Rd., but they were recently removed, since they had grown too large to allow parking outside the camp. The land was made conservation property and posted against hunting, both to protect the Scouts and horses, and to make it a safe haven for wildlife.

In 1972, when Troop 424 began, their first campout was at Whip O Will, using their brand new equipment. A not-quite-out fire was caught in the wind and burned about a half-acre and all their equipment. No one was injured, but we were fined for the unsafe situation by the Fire Dept. Bud Hahn was Scoutmaster then and Anita Creager on the Troop Committee. Troop 15 still used the camp, and their Scoutmaster, Frank Dutton and senior patrol leader, Danny Kiestlinger, were especially attached to the land. At one point, there was an archery course, but when compound bows became popular, the distance was no longer safe.

By 1985, the original trustees were getting older and no longer able to maintain the camp, so Anita found five new trustees: Dan Kiestlinger, Chuck Mower, Daryll Saunders, Don Levesque and Anita herself. The tick situation was very bad then, partly due to the horses and hay, so that the property wasn't used much. Chuck Mower got some publicity hoping for some help with the situation, and the Telegraph wrote an article titled, "Scouts are Ticked Off". The Associated Press picked up the story, and Anita got calls from as far away as Oregon, from people who had read it. The Harvard School of Public Health heard of our plight, and sent some researchers out to evaluate the tick situation. They captured 200 ticks in 20 minutes, and tested all. There were no deer ticks, only American Dog Ticks, and none carried any disease. None-the-less, no one wanted to camp there. After a great deal of research, it was learned that spraying was the only solution to tick problem. Anita hired TruGreen to spray twice that year, but the only area that could be sprayed was the open area, so the grass had to be kept short. For several years her son, who worked for a landscaping company, cut the grass himself.

Anita then asked each troop and pack in Merrimack to contribute to the cost of spraying and to obtain an insurance policy to cover liability, something that had not been done before. She requested \$50 from each troop (there were 4), \$25 from each pack (5) and \$25 from each Girl Scout troop (16). She also requested each Boy Scout troop and Cub Scout pack to put in one weekend a year maintaining the grass. Troop 424 built the present latrine and the Troop 15 Venture Crew the present council ring. Dan Bogdan built campsites and fire rings as a Woodbadge project. Some troops made donations, but it was not adequate to cover the expenses.

Finances became a problem in 1996, when Anita retired, and could no longer afford the cost of insurance and spraying. The trustees were concerned with liability. She negotiated with the Daniel Webster Council to take over the property, cover the insurance under their umbrella policy and agree to fund the annual tick spraying. Anita is still responsible for the maintenance under the authority of the Camp Carpenter Ranger and the Program Director of the Council. Poison Ivy is rampant, and Anita sprays several times a year to eradicate it.

Since then, an adult from Troop 15 had collected \$300 for a Woodbadge project and donated it for our use. It covered half the cost of a new gate. A Troop 424 family made the new gateway sign and PSNH installed three telephone poles for a gateway and flagpole. The axe yard is reconstructed each spring as a lashing project by first year scouts, and each troop and pack puts in a weekend maintaining the property. In 2005, Troop 19 moved a badly-eroded trail as a conservation project, and the Mormon units built a picnic table. The over-filled latrine was moved in 2006, and the culvert and road were repaired to reduce the damage that occurs each spring during the high water. A new, larger culvert was installed in Sept. 2006. Donations of time, supplies and equipment have been made by many local residents.

The camp remains an ideal location for local campouts during all seasons (except during spring floods) and day trips and there is easy access for canoeing. The camp is available by registering with the Daniel Webster Council Camping Division and signing up on the

clipboard on the gate. Many troops from Merrimack and surrounding towns use it regularly, and each helps with the maintenance. There is a combination lock on the gate to control access, although trespassing and vandalism are sometimes a problem. Spring flooding continues to challenge this flood plain, and in the big floods of 2006-07, the water level reached to the top of the gate at one point. An annual fire permit is issued and found inside the latrine, but the Merrimack Fire Dept. must be notified each time before use. Safe drinking water must be brought in, but river water is readily available for fire safety. No live-wood may be cut, but there is usually a good supply of winter fall-down and donated wood for fires and pioneering projects.