

What To Do at Your Camp Fire

By Harold Van Buren

The importance of the camp fire as an institution in a summer camp cannot be over-estimated! Every incidental of the camping program is a factor in making the camp fire the central attraction and the greatest joy of the camp. The evening with its gathering shadows, the physical weariness of the campers, the witchery of dancing flames--all tend to make the gatherings around the mystic circle the greatest single item in camp life.

It is the psychological time of day; for the boys are a little exhausted with the strenuous activities of the daily program, and the mind is receptive and susceptible to the soothing influence of a story or a little entertainment. The gathering of dusk over the far hills and the falling of night during the happy hour at the fire seem to round off to perfection a day in camp.

For the director or counselor in charge of the fires, there must have been many hard moments of thought and planning to make the council fire a success. Mere haphazard camp fires cannot attain their objective nor bring about the results. The fire must be planned, and, in planning, many things must be taken into consideration. First, the length of time to be occupied by the fire. At Cherokee, we have our camp fires four nights a week and allot one hour to each fire. A 'Camp Fire Hour' means sixty minutes of brisk, continuous events without any of the pauses and delays which cause boys' attention to wander.

There are as many different kinds of camp fires as there are evenings in which to have them. No two will work out just the same, and no camp fire will ever work out just as it has been planned. The director should have his program, carefully outlined, and written on a slip of paper. He should have in mind half a dozen little things that can be substituted if the mental attitude of the campers should prove itself not to be attuned to the proposed schedule.

Much Depends on the Start

The opening of the camp fire is naturally of great importance, since it sets the standard for the whole fire. We have evolved an elaborate ceremonial which occupies about eight minutes for the opening. However, the opening of the fire must follow one of three lines: Informal, formal or ceremonial.

The informal opening involves merely gathering around the fire at a call and starting right in with a certain program. The formal opening begins with a roll call, or a cabin report by counselors. The ceremonial follows a stated ritual which has been worked out and planned carefully, and in which all the members of the council fire have a part. This attracts boys far more than the other types. The

juvenile mind is attracted to the ceremonial and ritualistic, and the more elaborate and complex it is the better they will like it.

The camp fire proper cannot be a standardized process. With us, it consists of some stunts, games and contests (Indian wrestling, boxing, trick contests, and a hundred other ideas for competition and amusement). There are more formal stunts, in the form of short vaudeville acts staged and engineered by various cabins and groups of boys and counselors. These cannot come very often because of the amount of time involved for practice, the limited ideas of the boys and the fact that this formal camp fire type does not appeal so greatly to the individual boy.

Of course, the camp fire story is a factor of extraordinary importance to the council fire. An Indian legend always has an appeal, and every director can find literally thousands of them, all ready for his telling, in the books of Indian lore. An original story about anything at all has an irresistible lure.

Upon certain occasions we utilize our camp fire period as a time for making plans for hikes and special occasions. Inasmuch as these things involve every boy in camp, they hold his interest, even though they fail to furnish the inspiration which the camp fire has within its mystic power. We do not recommend this, but at times it has a great utility.

Most Depends on the Close

The closing of the camp fire is even more important than the opening. The psychology underlying the impressive and mystic closing is based upon the fact that directly after the closing of the fire, the boys go to their cabins and turn in. A solemn, quiet, impressive closing is an excellent preparation for a quiet, orderly retiring period and a quick trip to the land of sleep.

Our Cherokee ceremonial calls for the singing of one of our camp songs, the recitation by everyone of the closing words and the number of the council fire, the benediction in Indian sign language (by everyone) and then a solemn parade away from the council fire, in single file with the tom-toms beating a muffled, solemn tread. The impression on the young mind is tremendous.

Underlying all of this, back of all that must be done and the time that must be consumed to make the camp fires what they should be are the facts that:

- ▶ The camp fire is the finest and most proper place for instilling a real vital camp spirit.
- ▶ The camp fire is the easiest and most logical place for building up a healthful camp "pep."
- ▶ The camp fire is the camp's best place for the Director and staff to teach everything or anything.

- ▶ The camp fire is the finest source of camaraderie and fellowship.
- ▶ The camp fire should be the place where inspiration of the highest ideals can be effectively carried through.

Types of Camp Fires

We have ten general types of camp fires at Cherokee. Briefly explained they are:

- ▶ **The Singing Camp Fire:** Here the evening is spent in general singing of the ever-popular camping songs, the camp's own songs, popular songs, and impromptu verse songs. Everyone sings and the ukuleles, banjos, mouth organs and mandolins make romantic accompaniment.
- ▶ **The Hiking Fire:** In this fire, the secrets and tricks of successful over-night camping are explained and illustrated by campers and counselors for the instruction of the inexperienced. It gives everyone a chance to exchange ideas. Often hikes are planned at these fires.
- ▶ **The Pep Fire:** We find these are needed once in a while to bring up the camp spirit. During rainy summers, a pep fire is indispensable. We include a lot of camp songs, and yells. Perhaps a little pep talk or two interspersed at the right moments will succeed here when they fail at most other times.
- ▶ **The Instructive Fire:** A fire where effective teaching is done is long remembered. As an instance, at one of our fires this summer, the instruction was in the making of Indian necklaces (of glass beads, bells and wooden claws). One or two necklaces which had been made were brought out as examples and passed around. The talk illustrated how to carve a claw from a piece of wood. Within a week, every camper wore a ceremonial necklace at the fires.
- ▶ **The Game Fire:** The Director has at his command many books of interesting little games which can be successfully played at the camp fire and after a quiet day, a strenuous camp fire assists in stimulating that "tired feeling." This means healthy, happy boys.
- ▶ **The Moralistic Fire:** Here the central purpose is one or two serious talks from counselors or the Director. These talks must be most carefully planned and must follow the general plan of "Clean Sports," "Playing Fair" and "Living Clean." Subjects that vitally interest the real boy. This is a hard fire to put across, but once over it means an everlasting impression on the young minds.
- ▶ **The Impromptu Fire:** Here we let the boys plan their own evening. One evening every boy had to do some stunt, trick, or sing or crack a joke. The hour passed so quickly it hardly seemed possible that it was over. Another time, different boys suggested things they would like to do. This is a lazy fire, and one that should not be allowed more than three or four times in a season.
- ▶ **The Story Fire:** A good story or two, told or read, never fails to secure and hold attention. We lean strongly to Indian stories and find that all our boys, from the youngest to the oldest (and even the staff), enjoy them. There is something about "The Indians" that attracts the boy's mind, even when it is

housed in a man's body.

- ▶ **A Plan Fire:** Before a long trip, such as our all week trip to Canada, an evening can well be spent in teaching points of hike sanitation and comfort. Before a baseball game, plans for the entertainment of the visitors can be made. Before an entertainment, plans and instructions for the event can be handled at the fire where the whole group is assembled, willing and ready to give undivided attention.
- ▶ **The Cabin Fire:** About once a week, it is a great joy to let the boys build their fires before their own cabins, and spend the evening with their cabin mates. It gives the counselor a chance to know his worth away from the dominance of the Director. It gives the boys a chance to develop their own ideas, in a way the big fire does not.

But all in all, the Camp Fire will in years to come play a bigger part in the memories of the camper than anything else. The happy hours spent around the circle, with the flames leaping high or the embers glowing red, will live forever in the hearts of the boys, and be ever vivid in the memories of the Men, our products.

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