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Camp Onaway's First 100 years - Conclusion by Willa Lucarelli

In 1938, Mrs. Hollister while remaining actively involved with Onaway, officially retired. She still had sole ownership and received \$2,000 in rent and 40 percent of the profits. The remaining profit of less than \$600 was divided between Miss Frost, Director and Miss Stiles, assistant to the Director. Mrs. Hollister and her family spent time at the old Davis farmhouse which became known as Hollister House thus making them physically a part of camp. Miss Frost was well loved but apparently very strict. A camper recalls that Miss Frost was extremely clear that she did not countenance the counselors spending their one day off with men. While the Mary Lamb was the general meeting place for off days, the counselors thought that the staff was being asked to "snitch" on them, so they created a "Den of Iniquity" in an area between Merrill's Campground and Hillside Inn. There they stashed their birch beer and snacks.

Miss Frost promised that she would uphold the standards and policies that Mrs. Hollister had carried out for 24 years, and so, camp life seemed to remain unchanged under the new leadership. Of course, there were simple changes made to improve the health and hygiene of the camp. A shower house with hot water opened in 1937 and was a big hit...no more washing in the lake. Paper cups were used for drinking water instead of all using a single tin cup. Some changes reflected the times. It was becoming less common for families to have household servants, so Miss Frost implemented a weekly visit by the older girls to the camp kitchen. This change, however, was not a lasting change. Horseback riding was extremely popular, and it was probably the draw for new campers during this financially difficult time. Many camps closed during the Depression of the 1930's. Originally, the horses were stabled at the Pasquaney Inn; however, because of the 1942 wartime gas rationing, there was not enough gas to drive the campers back and forth. A temporary stable and riding ring was created out of the blackberry patch near the driveway.

Constant threats to camps were fires and unseasonably severe storms. Onaway suffered several fire accidents. The chapel caught on fire, and the campers formed a bucket brigade of water and saved the day. Unfortunately, the August 1938 fire tragedy at Camp Mowglis was not so lucky. A building was burned down and several counselors lost their lives. Three years later, August 9, 1941 brought another fire catastrophe to Onaway as the old Log Cabin burned to the ground. This time, fortunately, there were no casualties. With the generous contributions of camper families, a new beloved log cabin rose from the ashes and is still standing strong today.

There were a number of unusually severe storms that ripped through this area

(Continued on page 2)

in the late 1930's. In September of 1938, a hurricane wiped out massive walls of giant trees in this area. Henry, son of Mrs. Hollister writes that prior to the wind storm, there had been ten days of almost continuous rainfall that penetrated the ground and weakened the tree roots. Where once the entire camp property had been covered with gigantic, first-growth white pine trees, there was now a completely open vista with only an occasional tree still standing. His father thought the camp was finished, but his mother determined that the land would be cleared and the camp would continue. Ironically, only one little cabin had been crushed. The Hollister family stayed to hire a lumber company which brought in a sawmill that would process more than a million feet of fallen trees and clean up the camp property. The only change was the relocation of the chapel to a site just off of Campfire Rock where it still stands today.

Nature had more surprises in store of the campers of 1939. On a canoe trip to Belle Isle, a fierce thunderstorm came upon the campers. The campers never knew how close they had come to losing their two counselors due to lightning strikes. Later that summer, a counselor recalls watching a blue sky turn black and a "wall of water with a funny hissing kind of wind sound" come up the patch between the tennis courts. The backstop and the trees in the way went down. Her thought was to rescue the campers. She watched as the cabins of the younger campers were flipped and tried to get to them. She said that it was impossible to walk against the water on the path and had to crawl as sand washed into her mouth. The few electric wires they had were down and all the blankets, bedding and mattresses were soaked. Everyone was safe and the rest of the time was spent in hanging very dirty camp clothes and bedding from every bush and tree. Jane Kent, a later camp director, wrote that the trees were down everywhere and if there were any more storms, there wouldn't be any more trees left. She writes that Miss Stiles planted lots of trees "and each person has a tree they have to water."

The Aides program was established in 1942, and their chief duty was to cultivate a Victory Garden. The United States had entered World War II, and the garden was a way to help feed the camp and put less pressure on the food supply. There was a camper who was related to Mr. Burpee of the Burpee Seed Company, and Miss Stiles asked for donated seeds which she received.

Probably the one direct impact of WWII was the gasoline shortage. Few parents could visit, and camp trips were not able to go long distances...so there were lots of local hikes and canoe trips. Although the campers felt safe, everyone was aware there were many fathers overseas, and the counselors were worried about the men they were engaged to. There were current events on Campfire Rock on Sunday evenings. Several English children came to camp after coming to the U.S. to escape the London blitz. One camper was a French refugee. Counselor Jirka Mala came to the U.S. from Nazi-overrun Czechoslovakia and started teaching tennis and stayed until the mid 1960's. This era produced lower camp enrollments. In 1939, there were 56 campers and a new cabin group for older girls. Enrollment dropped to 32 plus counselors the following year, and in 1942, there were 35 campers plus four Aides. This was also the summer that Miss Frost stayed home to care for her sick mother, the first time away from Onaway in 30 years. The following year, Miss Stiles was sick and in Plymouth Hospital for the summer while Miss Frost directed camp. With enrollment down, after bills were paid, there was little take-home pay and many financial worries. Finally, the camp Log, August 14, reports "the war is over." Following a short chapel service and listening to the radio, many screams and cheers were heard across the lake.

By early 1944, Miss Frost resigned because she couldn't fulfill both her responsibilities at home and do justice to her yearlong camp position. Although her Director years had been difficult with many crises, she carried on the tradition of strong administrative and spiritual leadership. She remained interested in Onaway throughout her life. Her cousin, Kathy Broderick Baird, former camper, aide, counselor and Director of the Trustees, recalls many conversations about the early days of Onaway with Cousin Fran.

Margaret Stiles came to Camp Onaway in 1918 to teach swimming and from the beginning she believed in Mabel Hollister's goals, ideals and program. After a quarter century of preparation, in 1944, she became Director for the next 23 years...and owner of the camp for almost that long. Miss Stiles may have been a memorable spiritual figure to the campers and counselors, but business dealings often brought out a different side of her.

After becoming Director of Onaway, Miss Stiles was determined to buy the Camp from the Hollisters and the fact that she had no money was not an obstacle. In April of 1945, in New York City, she convened the first meeting of the Onaway Financial Advisory Committee. The committee was made up of former Onaway campers and their very distinguished husbands who just happen to be bankers, brokers and insurance company executives. Miss Stiles vigorously proposed her plan to buy the camp for \$25,000, with \$5,000 down and a \$20,000 mortgage at 5% interest. To her surprise, the committee had concerns about \$25,000 being a fair offer since the

Hollister's asking price was \$40,000. There were also concerns over the camp boundaries and a survey. And finally the committee would not guarantee the \$5,000 down payment.

Eventually, the Hollisters loaned Miss Stiles the \$5,000, in September of 1946, making her sole owner of camp Onaway. The loan was a 5 year loan at 5% interest rate with mortgage payments beginning in 1951. The Hollisters could not have been any fairer or more generous.

Miss Stiles' advisory committee continued to meet until 1951 and tried to offer sound financial advice but Miss Stiles, stubborn as she was, almost took an exact opposite course from what was advised. From 1951 to 1959 she managed the camp operation with no outside assistance and she faced a number of personal burdens and hard decisions. The camp was making very little money, but Miss Stiles knew that after almost 50 years of operation Woodland Hall and other parts of camp's physical plant needed rebuilding. She was also coming to grips, at age 60, she needed to find a successor as both director and owner of Onaway.

Becoming a nonprofit, tax-exempt institution, which had been suggested by her Financial Advisory Committee and urged by many parents, would have solved both problems. It would place ownership in a trust rather than an individual, who, however well meaning, might not be the best equipped to be a manager. It would also allow for better fund-raising, since people are more likely to give when they know they get a tax deduction and be assured that the money is going to the institution rather than to a for-profit owner. In spite of all these reasons, Miss Stiles was still stubbornly apposed, even after seeking legal counsel. She did attempt some fund raising with limited success but by 1956 her debt load was increasably burdensome. She borrowed to fund building remodeling at camp and the construction of a new house in Chappaqua, NY. In 1958, she sent a letter to the First National Bank president in Bristol explaining that she was going to sell 8 lots, now known as Onaway Point Road, for a total of \$24,000. The lots did sell for between \$3500 and \$3900 each which ultimately was unfortunate for the camp. She used the money to pay off her debts, including the Hollister's, albeit by taking out a new mortgage.

Miss Stiles now became focused on finding a worthy successor and after a few failed attempts she came up with the idea of approaching Camp Pasquaney. In January of 1959, she wrote Director Charlie Stanwood that she believed it might be possible to raise tax-exempt funds from Onaway alumnae and friends of the Pasquaney trust so that Camp Pasquaney could buy Onaway and perpetuate it. She also reconvened her Financial Advisory Council, in May of 1959, which met for the first time in eight years. She told the group that she was willing to reorganize as a trust but that the facility would need to be purchased so that she could be paid for her investment. Pasquaney land and buildings were originally donated when their non-profit trust was initiated. The Advisory meeting concluded with no consensus about next steps.

In August of 1959, Miss Stiles had her attorney send a letter to the Pasquaney Trust proposing that it buy Onaway for \$125,000, with a first mortgage from a bank for \$50,000, she would hold a \$25,000 second mortgage and \$50,000 to come from gifts to a separate fund trust. Within 3 weeks Pasquaney's board responded stating that they could not agree to the merger of the two camps, they did offer guidance from 3 of their key trustees on setting up a separate Camp Onaway Trust. By the fall of 1959, Miss Stiles did not know how to address Pasquaney's recommendations which were similar to what her own Financial Advisory had proposed.

After much coaching, over camp closing weekend 1960 a group of key Onaway parents and future trustees persuaded Miss Stiles to move forward to making Camp Onaway a nonprofit corporation. She agreed to lease the camp to a to-be-formed board of trustees for three years, during which time the trustees would raise funds to purchase the camp.

The first Onaway Trustee meeting took place November 11, 1960 at Miss Stiles' home. It could be said that this was probably the most important meeting in Onaway's history. The meeting was very heated and discussion lasted for hours about the selling price, how soon camp could apply for nonprofit status and how soon it could apply for incorporation and how long Miss Stiles would remain as director. She hoped for one more year but stayed for six more.

The saga continued over the winter and Miss Stiles' stubbornness persisted for two more years. Finally in November of 1963 the trustees agreed to purchase the camp for \$125,000, financing a \$40,000 first mortgage and a second for \$85,000 held by Miss Stiles.

In 1964 the American Camping Association was able to convince the federal government to recognize private camps as educational institutes, allowing donations to them to be considered tax deductible and in the fall of 1964 Camp Onaway completed its application.

In November of 1963, Miss Stiles flew to Detroit with Henry Hollister, son of Mabel Hollister, to close an-

other circle of camp's history by making what she knew would be her last visit to the 95 year old Mabel Hollister. It would be the last meeting between the director about to retire and the founder, about to die.

Miss Stiles' last year as director was 1966, and it was a year full of celebration by the camp community to honor her many accomplishments since joining as a counselor in 1918. She had her faults but her stubbornness won out helping to transition Onaway from a private enterprise to a successful nonprofit Trust.

Over the next eighteen years Onaway had four Directors:

Buell Stanwood -1967/1969

Mr. Bill St. John – 1970/1972

Jane Kent – 1973/1977

Lisa Stokes Taylor – 1978/1983

During those eighteen years each of the Directors made their contributions to shape the Onaway we know today but it's important to note the basics of daily camp life took their roots back with Mabel Hollister in 1911, those traditions carry forward today.

During the final 10 days of camp in the summer of 1983, Caroline "Carol" Morgan Southall, a former camper and aide, ended up serving as the camp nurse, those ten days started a memorable 20 year run as Carol Southall returned in 1984 as the new Director. Carol came from an Onaway family, her mother, two aunts and Carol's sister were all Onaway alums. Her husband Roger, an orthopedic surgeon, had been a camper and counselor at Pasquaney in the late 40's and early 50's. During her interview with the trustee search committee she promised to make "as few changes as possible the first year or so. Stability is what camp needs, and if traditions, the daily schedule and the basic rules are closely followed everyone feels more secure," These words felt soothing to the trustees after such a tumultuous couple of decades in the camp's history.

Carol was clearly an innovator, she added the crew program in 1986 after convincing St. Paul's school to donate an old, wooden shell. In 1988, after Carol's urging the trustees negotiated a 50 year renewable lease with the Society for the Prevention of New Hampshire for a parcel of land on Big Island in Lake Umbagog, Maine. The \$20,000 cost of the lease was donated by the Bradley Higgins foundation. Bradley had been a loyal Onaway parent and former owner of the Hillside Inn. The Big Island property, at Carols urging, became a special destination for older campers to set up a base camp.

The \$20,000 gift from Bradley Higgins laid the groundwork for the goal-setting involved in Onaway's first large capital campaign. The annual capital campaign lives on and has been vital to sustaining Onaway for the next 100 years. By 1985 it was clear to the trustees that Onaway's annual operating budget left barely enough funds at the end of the year to begin operations in the new year. Clearly Onaway had to establish an endowment to guarantee its future. In November of 1990 the first large scale capital campaign was launched with a \$500,000 goal, under the inspiring title "Onaway---A gift from one Generation to Another." Pledges and gifts totaled \$505,000 when the campaign came to a close. During this campaign it was also announced that Henry and Dot Hollister were donating the Hollister House and land, valued at \$475,000, to Onaway. The Hollister house abuts Onaway's property; it's the shingled cape just south of Onaway's main entrance.

Also a legacy of the early 1990's capital campaign was the birth of the Circle Program, the inspiration of Seton O' Reilly and Carol Southall, to develop a mini-camp for girls at risk in New Hampshire similar to Pasquaney's founding of the Mayhew Program. The Circle Program was inaugurated in August of 1993, for its first 2 week session, held at Onaway after camp closed. The first session had 22 New Hampshire girls, age 9 – 11.

The Circle Program was just one example of Mrs. Southall's ongoing attempts to enrich the camp experience in as many ways as possible. From the time she became Director, she had a vision, looking for ways to make the oldest campers and aides camp experience even more challenging and rewarding while developing leadership skills that would strengthen the counselor staff in years to come. In 1993, the Onaway Wilderness Leadership Experience (OWLES) program was born, a three-and-a-half week program comprised of canoeing, kayaking and backpacking in Maine, using the Lake Umbagog campsite as the base.

The trustees and Mrs. Southall began to talk about her retirement and how to plan for the transition to a new Director. Originally, she planned to step down after the 2002 season but later decided that she wanted to finish with 20 summers as Director. The search for a new Director began in 2002 by establishing a search committee headed by Kathy Broderick Baird. By the fall of 2002 the search was narrowed to 4 strong candidates.

In January of 2003, the search committee announced the choice: Anne Person Conolly, a former camper and counselor in the 1960's.

The summer of 2003 was one of transition, with Anne Conolly spending the last few weeks working with Mrs. Southall to learn the routine.

Anne Conolly took over the reins for the 2004 year and now is in her 9th year as the Director, carrying on the traditions that make Onaway a very special place for young women.

In August of 2011, I celebrated 100 years as Camp Onaway. Alums from all over the world came back to celebrate with me. Many remarked that not much had changed...the daily schedule is still the same, the songs we all sang remain, the relationships we all developed were renewed....and while some of the buildings are new, the core buildings remain. They all felt like children again!!

Onaway is strong and financially secure to face the next 100 years.

Willa and Bill Lucarelli would like to acknowledge as a reference source for this article the new book written by Helen Stokes Graven, author of *Let Her Strong and Ageless Be*, The History of Camp Onaway.

WORD-OKU

Using only the letters MAYHEW TPK fill in the following

Each letter must appear only once in each block, row and column

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