

Lee Cornell interview
8/31/20 8-9pm CT via zoom
by Matt Mencke

(MM) How did you come to work at Many Point?

(LC) The years before I joined staff, we had a couple of really good Many Point troop counselors. One of them was Phil Taylor and the one right before I started working at camp was Murray Cooper. Both made a grand impression and said “you know, you could apply to do this, you could do it too” which was pretty much all I needed.

During the off season, Murray worked at Rothschild Clothing in Knollwood which was where my dad preferred to shop. We would run into him and he’d ask, “did you get the application in?”

So your troop camped at Many Point.

Yes, in fact where the Voyageur beach is now, we opened up that site in 1963 or 64 because the troop I was in, Troop 369 out of St. Louis Park had full sized teepees. We had skinned the timbers for it and the whole works but it’s hard to set those up in a wooded area so we needed a place that was more open. The Ten Chiefs sites were booked out from here to eternity, but they said, “there’s an open area at the south end of Many Point Lake if you want to go in there.” So myself, my dad, another guy and his son went in there and we sprayed for poison ivy, cleared a bunch of brush and it worked out. The next year the camp said you can’t have that site anymore because we’re going to use it for JLTC now.

This was in the days before Voyageur was a sub camp, correct?

It was X-Base or Explorer Base at the time, and there were limited sites on Many Point Lake. Most of the sites were on Round Lake. On Many Point there was Duluth / Grand Portage and two others although I’m not sure when they opened, Colt and Winchester.

It sounds like you had admired a couple of the staff.

Right, and we also had two staff members who had been active in our troop, Dave Rutlen and Doug Karlson so it was a situation where you knew people, you had people encouraging you to do it and so it seemed like a good idea.

You were a CIT in ‘65. Tell me about that.

You rotated between places and I spent staff week out in Pioneer which was brutal work for a week. I had never imagined, “...but it’s almost dark.” “Yeah but it’s not dark, so we can still keep working.” It was amazing and it was so much fun and as long as you worked hard you were in good shape. The good news was, I learned that lesson because I saw it and thought,

this is easy, you just make dang sure you keep working and don't sit down and people will be happy with you.

You must have made some good impressions as a CIT to be hired on at Pioneer the next year.

Again, I think it was mostly a matter of working hard. That's what I would tell CIT's later in my Many Point career, "if you work hard, when you screw up... and you will screw up, you fess up right away." You can't work here and not make mistakes.

I see that you worked in Pioneer from 1966-1970 ('66 Assistant Program Director, '67 Aquatics Aide, '68 Assistant Aquatics Director, '69 Commissioner, '70 Program Director).

I made this thing about going around the lake closing camps out (laughter). Not quite, but I think Chuck Fisher actually closed out Pioneer.

Buckskin was still considered the introductory place. Ten Chiefs, Flintlock, X-Base and Pioneer were all pretty much for the more developed troops. Ten Chiefs campers received hot stacks so we could mock them for that (laughter) and all the staff meals at that time were delivered as hot stacks as well which we learned to hate. We would beg, "please just send us the food!" because it would leave the Dining Hall and by the time it had stopped at every single troop site and lodge along the way out everything arrived cold, there was condensation running down the inside, it was not good, but we were really hungry and we were mostly teenagers / young adults so it was fine.

Were the sites in Pioneer generally full back in those days?

Absolutely! In fact we added three sites on the bay (Bunyan, Merritt and Ramsey) simply due to demand. One of the cool things when we were clearing out Bunyan and getting it ready, we found a carved board that had been hung up by a troop that had camped there in 1946.

In the mid sixties, Robert Gaylord was still coming to Many Point. Do you have any recollection of that?

By that point Gaylord would just sort of visit, come up, spend the weekend sort of thing and there was a rule with the staff, spread the word Gaylord is at Gaylord's this week, anybody who goes in there will be shot ... and then fired (laughter). But I did run into him one time, I was riding along with somebody and for some reason we had to drop off a block of ice or something and I saw him.

At one point weren't the blocks of ice stored in a shed near Gaylord's?

They were at one point and then they were moved down and put behind the Red Owl by the gas pumps.

One of the things you liked when you were a CIT was being assigned to the Trading Post. One of your two week assignments was generically Main Area so you'd spend four days at the Trading Post and four days up at maintenance and then four days at the Dining Hall or somewhere. When you were in the Trading Post, one of your jobs was to cut ice. A Scoutmaster would come in and say, "I want 20 pounds" and there were these massive blocks of ice that Boots and Ale had cut out of the lake and you'd go in there with a big bow saw or a cross cut saw and saw them down to a size that you thought was 20 pounds and then use the big tonger things and haul 'em out. It was wonderful because you got in there with all of the ice and on a hot summer day it was really nice and cool. However, all of the ice was packed with sawdust to keep it from melting so you also had sawdust in your t-shirt, in your underwear and pretty much everywhere. So you cooled off, but you were wet and covered in sawdust.

There was a Viking Council Executive in the '30's and 40's by the name of Lee Cornell. Any relation?

No relation. I never met him and I had never heard of him until somebody during a national camp inspection said something like.. "you know, your father" and I was like, what? Who?

There were a lot of changes happening in camp between '66 and '83. Which ones stand out for you?

In '72, I was the Camp Director in Flintlock and we had to close Flintlock and JLTC two weeks early because we ran out of money. It was a combination of a bunch of things and a failure within the council to recognize that changes were taking place. It was no longer the 1950's where mom doesn't work and dad can get a couple of weeks off especially if it's for scouts and things like that. Two week camping was becoming really difficult for families, the baby boom was mostly over and there was a decline in the popularity of scouting. Scouting was kind of struggling to adapt and no one had really looked ahead to see what was coming.

I would imagine the closing of Flintlock as a program camp was a major change.

Yes, and JLTC was an integral part of the *new* Flintlock. It was, let's put JLTC in Flintlock and we've got some sailboats that we can put in there and horses. When I came back to work at camp in '74 they asked if I wanted to run sailboats and I said sure, my dad's got a sailboat I can sail and '74 was such a perfect summer. It was like God's gift to sailors.

So the horse corral was new in the mid seventies?

As they had people departing in '72 they said, "we should get horses" and as the horses arrived they said, "what are we going to do with these?" Fortunately I knew a little bit about horses because my grandfather had horses and I said, "well I can help" and they said, "oh good, you're the new wrangler." (laughter) There's a lot of that that goes on.

Towards the end of the '74 season after a summer of watching kids sail and fixing sailboats I took a leadership position in the Dining Hall for the last two weeks. It was a spot that clearly needed some attention and in '75 I came back as the Services Director.

Keep in mind that from '72 for maybe a half-dozen years there was a lot of turmoil and turnover. What are we going to do next? Who's in charge? Lots of dithering.

Other big changes?

When Bob Gagner came in '77, he had lots of great ideas to attract kids and without Bob's vision, there would not be Jet Skis and all the cool stuff they have now. The truth at the time was we barely had enough money to make payroll. So Tom Holden and I did what we could to restrain Bob initially, telling him, "don't go out to the camps and tell them about the treehouse idea, they're wondering why they don't have enough .22 ammunition."

It also used to be all cooking over open campfires and towards the end of the season troops would often complain that they couldn't find any firewood.

Things change and to Many Points credit part of the reason it's been able to survive is that they've managed to adapt without wrecking the experience.

The mid-sixties was right around the time that the Ballad was written by Mark Keller. What do you remember about that?

I'm positive that during staff week when I was a CIT and assigned to Pioneer ('65), Mark Keller and John Reed were both in Pioneer and I remember they both played guitar and were singing songs every evening.

Do you remember any of the songs they would play?

I don't at all. I remember the music from X-Base when I was there though, Dylan. A lot of Bob Dylan. It probably had a lot to do with the fact that there were no radio stations to be picked up and not too many people owned portable stereos of any kind so most of the stuff that people had up there were reel to reel tapes with bootlegs and maybe a couple of turntables. So if someone in your subcamp had music and liked Dylan, you all liked Dylan. It was either that or nothing.

A lot of the music that was played was stuff that was popular the previous winter and spring. Staffers would pick it up, learn it and bring it up to camp.

Aquatics Aide

Back in the day, are you ready for another story? **Ready!** In 1967, I was an Aquatics Aide in Pioneer and what the Aquatics Aide did was guard swims and teach an aquatics merit badge. Typically, Lifesaving went to the Aquatics Director, Swimming went to the Assistant Aquatics Director and then one of the two Aquatics Aides would take Canoeing and the other would take Rowing. So each Aide had five, half hour swims to watch in the morning and five, 45 minute swims to watch in the afternoon and that was your life. Walking in a swimsuit, barefoot from one troop site to the next for their Troop Swim. The buddy poles were there. The boat was there and you'd go out and sit in the boat with the Scoutmaster and *with luck*, the Scoutmaster smoked and he would give you a cigarette and you could sit in the rowboat with the Scoutmaster smoking cigarettes. (laughter)

People would ask, "how did you get such a good tan?" I sat in an aluminum boat on a lake for hours and hours every day of the summer.

Sitting out in the boat for 30-45 minutes with the Scoutmasters you got to hear lots of interesting stories. One guy that I remember showed me the numbers tattoo he got during his time in a concentration camp in Germany. I remember saying, "I don't know how to respond to that" and he said, "that's probably best because the people that say oh I can imagine what that was like, can't". Another guy was a Minneapolis Firefighter and he had all kinds of stories.

These swims were happening not at the main beach but at the campsite beaches.

Yes, each troop had their own beach. They all had their own buddy boards (some more elaborate than others) and would put out blocks and buoys for deep water. When we switched over to a centralized beach, there was a lot of moaning among the troops. It didn't really go over so well until the kids got down there and saw they had access to kickboards, masks and snorkels.

Tell me about your involvement in the Many Point Staff Alumni Association.

That beautiful membership database that you are using today, I started that long ago. I got copies of the rosters and invented a numbering system so that each person could have a unique identifier. In probably the late 80's I had the single database file on four floppy disks. When I got an office PC with a 10 Mbps hard drive I went, "Oh my God I can put all four of these on one file at the same time and sort them all."

This has been a great conversation Lee! Thank you. Anything you would like to add?

In 1970 I was the Program Director in Pioneer and the Camp Director was Rick Troiden. Rick said, "we need a phrase, we need an expression that says we don't care what it is, if your troop wants it, we're going to give it to you." So we came up with the phrase, *Just Do It!* We made leather tags to hang on our uniforms and we always wore them. Nike stole that from us! (laughter) I learned a lot from Rick. People would say, "what if they ask for something crazy?" He'd say, "how crazy can it be?" Most of the requests were within reason and we might have had to convince them to make some modifications, but we figured the best way to make them happy was to get them telling stories about how when they were at Pioneer, anytime they asked for something, they got it. That sort of attitude certainly existed at Many Point beforehand and has also held on over the years. *Just Do It!*