

Ron Schroeder, Camp Ranger (1979-2008) Interview: 08/05/19
Present by phone, Ron Schroeder and Jay Wescott

Jay:

Ron, would you share a little about your background before you came to Many Point.

Ron:

When I was eight or nine years old, I worked on my aunt and grandparents farm, just north of Park Rapids. I spent long days haying, digging fence posts, and stringing barb wire. We worked well into the evenings, using vehicle headlights to see. I enjoyed driving my uncle's homemade tractor and spending time watching Uncle Eddy build birdhouses.

I started in Cub Scouts as a first-year Webelo. As a Boy Scout, I belonged to Troop 34 out of Paynesville, and Carl Wagner was the troop leader for as long as I can remember. I loved troop camping. A farmer on the outskirts of town would let the troop camp on his land next to the river. We also did summer and winter camping on the Big Island on Lake Koronis. I also enjoyed camping at the Charles Sumner Canoe Base in Ely and Philmont Scout Camp. Friends made in Troop 34 are still friends today.

My dad had a workshop in the basement, and I enjoyed building many little woodworking projects. In high school, the woodworking class was one of my favorites. After high school, I worked for the US Geologic Survey company. I helped take measurements to record elevations at various locations around the country. When I received my draft notice, I enlisted in the Air Force because my favorite uncle, Alex, had been in the Air Force. After basic training, I spent six months stationed in Amarillo, Texas with the "Little West Point Squadron.

I was then moved to Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona, to work on the U2 airplanes. While there, I met and married Helene. In 1970 I was honorably discharged, and we moved back to Paynesville, Minnesota, and I worked in my dad's mechanics shop for one year. In December of that year, Mindy, our first daughter, was born.

I then worked at a local gas station and bait shop as a mechanic for four years. Our second daughter, Erin, was born, July 1974. In 1975 I worked for Minnegasco, making service calls on furnaces, water heaters, and dryers. In 1978 while visiting a friend, Tom Burr, I learned of the Camp Ranger job being open at Many Point Scout Camp. Awhile later, Bob Hannah, from the Viking Council, contacted me and offered the job. My wife and I had some serious talks. Our concern was about where and how our daughters would get to school. We took the job and followed our dreams.

Jay:

What was it like to raise two daughters at Many Point?

Ron:

It was easier than I thought it might be. Erin, our youngest, was four years old and Mindy was seven years old when my wife and I moved up to Many Point in 1979. The girls grew up at summer camp where they made a lot of good friends. As parents, we started to worry when the girls were in their teenage years. We learned quickly when most of the staff came back year after year; doing a good job, the staff acted as big brothers for our daughters. The staff knew not to mess around with the Ranger's daughters. The staff watched out for them, and kept an eagle eye out for them when they were out and about camp. Our daughters had so much fun taking part in the Scout activities, like going to the shooting range and climbing towers. My girls to this day, really love the camp and living up there.

The only drawback to living at camp was getting them to school. The school year was a little less enjoyable for them because of the long bus ride. The girls were enrolled in the Waubun School District long before there was an option for Open enrollment. For me to be back home to work at eight o'clock; we had to get them up quite early and drive them on highway 113 to the Elbow Lake Village before we met the school bus. From there they would have another twenty-mile ride into school. It was ten miles for me to get them to the school bus every day. My wife would pick them up in the afternoon while I was working.

From our home, it was an hour and a half each way to and from school. It was very tiresome for the girls. For me, wintertime driving got to be a bit of a challenge; because many times in the early morning, the gravel roads weren't plowed out. Once in awhile Ale Niemi and I would take the truck out and plow a path out to the main highway so we could get up to the bus. Occasionally after a massive snowfall we got up extra early to plow the road. After plowing the road, we'd drive back home to pick up the girls. It was then we learned that the school had canceled classes. In those days, there were no cell phones or a way to call back home. After waiting for a certain amount of time without the bus arriving, you'd turn around and drive home. That was frustrating, and luckily, it didn't happen too often. Almost every year, there was one or two times when this occurred. The girls survived it and would not care to go through that aspect again. They sure loved their time in the summer at camp.

Jay:

Did the girls participate in school activities?

Ron:

Mindy participated in band, and there was no late or after school activity bus. Sometimes she stayed after school, and we would have to drive to Waubun to pick her up. If they had a concert, of course, we drove. Most of her band practices occurred during school hours. The girls would have liked to participate in after school activities but based on where we lived; it wasn't possible.

Jay:

When you started at Many Point, you were an Assistant Ranger with Ale Niemi. What was it like working with Ale?

Ron:

Ale and his wife Irene were very good to the girls and us. They looked out and cared for us. Ale was a good mentor for me. He was a quiet man that taught me by example and gladly shared information with me. I learned by watching and observing him. Because we moved to the camp in April, one of Becker County's snowiest winters and muddiest springs; it wasn't until May or June before I saw the whole camp.

Ale was a powerful, quiet-spoken guy that showed me around and communicated expectations. Some of the staff would comment on the size of his forearms. He's got forearms bigger than my thighs. He was excellent with machinery and loved that heavy machinery. Especially that old road grader and Caterpillar bulldozer. He also enjoyed playing around with that camp stuff. Not only could he fix anything, but he could also MacGyver anything. He was good at woodworking and light construction. It was an excellent learning experience working with Ale.

Jay:

Who determined the jobs, ordering, and sequencing?

Ron:

What needed to get done, and what we needed to do each day was Ale's time-table. Hooking up all the camp's water systems and all that took a couple of years to learn. There were ten different wells on the property and many miles of lines that needed to be turned on in the spring and shut down in the fall.

Jay:

I'm not familiar with the wells, and I'm assuming they needed electricity to run.

Ron:

All the camp wells had been switched over to deep wells with submersible pumps and pressure gauges by the time I got to camp. All the camps each had their well. The well serving all of Main area and Buckskin Camp was in the maintenance shop. Larkin Lodge had it's well, that also furnished all of Staff Family Area. Ten Chiefs, Flintlock, Voyager, Pioneer, Family Camp, and Frontier all had their wells. The ranger houses each had separate wells. Every spring, you had to chlorinate all the wells. All the camps needed freshwater and sanitized wells. It was just the two of us to complete this job on time.

Buildings also needed to be readied. When I came down to work, Ale would have the projects lined up. Some projects were on-going projects. At times we were building things for the summer camp season. We often built picnic tables, dock sections, latrine buildings or cabinets in the wintertime. You knew what we were going to work on each day. Things got very busy once spring rolled around. I traveled with him the first couple of years getting everything hooked-up, things turned on. All the buildings needed to be worked on before the staff arrived.

Ron:

Ale had a Finnish accent and a dry sense of humor. A few of his carpenter friends, Dallas Linsey, and George Roseau, from the Strawberry Lake area, would come to work at camp and helped out in the Spring, Summer, and Fall. They helped with building projects that we couldn't get to during the busy camping season. As good friends of Ale, being funny guys, they had a good sense of humor and would joke around.

Fixing all the donated vintage camp vehicles ready for the summer was a big job and quite the challenge. Ale was very knowledgeable about fixing those vehicles. Some of those vehicles had probably been around since the time Henry Ford invented the Model A truck. For me, it was helpful that I had some mechanical experience when I started.

Jay:

Did you have to order parts from different places?

Ron:

We did most of the shopping for camp in Detroit Lakes. We would go to the parts store and order parts. Sometimes we had spare parts laying around. Other times we got used parts from a junkyard and saved a few dollars. Sometimes if you needed parts quickly, you jury-rigged something until you could get the parts. The vehicle needed to get back in service. Many times you could get the parts locally.

Jay:

Did you have a specific vehicle repair budget?

Ron:

We had several meetings during the year with the Camp Director. Sometimes we met at the Council Office and sometimes at camp. We would work up a maintenance budget for all the parts and materials needed to run the camp and keep it running. We also had to budget for all the new activity projects.

Jay: There was a succession of Camp Directors when you were there.

Ron:

Bob Hannah was the Director (78-80) that hired me. My wife and I had an excellent relationship with him and his wife. Bob Gagner was the Director (81-88). In 1989, Bob was employed in a different position within the Council.

Larry Underkoffler was the Director (89-92). He was easy going and didn't seem to worry about the small stuff. His leadership style was if something needed to get done, give it a try and see if it works. He had a friend from Winona that hand-made canoes. Larry put a hand-made twenty-six-foot Voyager canoe on the roof of his van and brought it to camp. Of course, we immediately had to put it in the water and paddle around some. Besides being fun to work with, Larry was an artist. He did a pencil sketch of our house and garage at Many Point. He also painted a wildlife scene with ducks. Both those art pieces are hanging in my home in Park Rapids.

Ron:

Bob Gagner came back as the Director (93-06). Bob was the longest-running Camp Director and probably still is. He was detailed and thoroughly researched his innovative program ideas before implementing them. Bob's new ideas attracted increasing numbers of Scouts and kept them coming back year-after-year.

Travis Suttan was the Director (07-14). Travis was enthusiastic, had a positive personality, and continued the Bob Gagner staff training practices. He ran a lot of classes for the staff during staff week that enhanced the quality of staff.

When Ale Niemi retired in 1987, I became the Senior Ranger, and there was a succession of Assistant Rangers, Chuck Jensen, Jon Longfors, Ed Mielke, and Scott Hollermann. Since my retirement, the Assistant Ranger position no longer exists. They are now called Co-Rangers. When Paul Marcus was hired, he was a Co-Ranger with Scott Hollermann.

When Paul Marcus left to work at a camp in Michigan, they hired Josh Field, a mature twenty-one-year-old, to be the Co-Ranger. This past summer, while being a Volunteer Ranger, I worked with him. Josh's got a lot of mechanical knowledge and is good at building things. Scott Hollermann, the senior Co-Ranger knows all the vehicles and can fix just about anything. That worked out good for me as I preferred to do mostly carpentry work.

Jay:

It sounds like there is just too much work with not enough help.

Ron:

Good volunteer help is accepted and appreciated. The camp has work parties, and skilled volunteers donate time. Electricians, plumbers, carpenters and air conditioner repair (John Niemi) often volunteer. Some of the volunteer's that come up in the summer volunteer to help. No way could just two Rangers do all the necessary work.

Jay: Do they hire additional help in the summer?

Ron:

They hire Megan Hollermann, Scott's wife. She works in the Maintenance Department and is very good at carpentry and woodworking. She is like a third Ranger during the summer. Megan has done a lot of the waterline maintenance.

Jay: Has it ever been requested to have more than two Rangers?

Ron:

Oh, it has, and we've talked about that with the Camp Directors over the years. There have been so many projects assigned before the start of camp. In the spring of the year, it gets crazy. The Camp Directors never came across anyone to work limited hours or just short temporary work. The budget didn't allow for that.

Jay:

Would you talk about the number of changes that occurred while you were there? When I left camp in 1967, I commented, "If they build any more buildings, it will look like a YMCA camp. In my mind, Many Point was real camping as opposed to Y camping.

On Wednesday, July 12, 1995, a windstorm hit Many Point. On Thursday at 4:30 A.M. straight-line winds clocked at between 70 and 80 MPH tore through the camp. So, I stand corrected. Many Point needed more buildings, storm shelter buildings to protect the Scouts and Staff.

Ron:

That storm destroyed so many trees that came down. We were blocked-in for a day or better before we could get enough help. So many volunteers showed up with chain saws, vehicles, and trucks to help clear the road. We hired our excavator that we always dealt with, and he came in with a bulldozer. He started at the gate lodge because nobody could get out of camp. Downed trees blocked the road to the North and the South. I couldn't even walk from my house to the maintenance shop without having to duck under and over trees. My boat was totaled when a tree fell on it.

That was a terrible and traumatic event at camp. That's another testament to our Council volunteer network. We were inundated with helpful people once we got the roads opened. People cutting trees with chainsaws made a path ahead of me, and I followed with the tractor pushing the trees off to the side.

The wind destroyed the power lines that came into camp. We were working sixteen hours a day to get everything cleaned up in the campsites. That was the first and only time I can recall that we had to send Scouts home early. We had to move Scouts out of camp as best we could by getting the roads open.

The problem of Troops not being able to check out at AD Building was resolved. My wife, who usually worked at the AD building and another staff person, rode a pontoon to the various Troop sites to complete the check-out. There was a lot of ingenuity for everybody to make all things work.

An adult leader suffered the only injury. On a handheld cot, he was carried about a mile to the awaiting ambulance on the South exit. He had multiple fractures of a leg. Of all the kids, adults, and staff, that was the only injury.

When the storm approached, the staff ran from their tents to their vehicles. It was devastating to see so many trees across tents. It still amazes me that there was only one serious injury with all the trees that came down. After all the Scouts got out on Thursday, the staff thought, can we get camp up and running by Sunday?

Freshwater for drinking and cooking was of great importance, so we got the generators operating. It wasn't until the following week that we got Rural Electric Association power back. We kept our generators full of gas and running our wells for six days.

Ron:

The staff continued eating in the Dining Hall because we had a massive generator that kept the coolers and food safe. Because we didn't have enough generators, at the Commissary, we had a refer truck parked to accommodate all the frozen food.

We cleared all the campsites out making them safe again. There were so many trees that were hung-up. Those widow-makers all had to be cut down. Some of the volunteers bought new chainsaws before coming to camp.

It was a miracle that the camp was ready to accept Scouts on Sunday. All the cleared roads were safe. The campsites were safe for Scouts and tents. It was inspiring to see the enormous effort by so many people. Before we got power back, we were all bathing in the lake.

Bob Gagner led the charge for needed storm shelters. What was unique about building the Storm Shelters was to design a multiple-purpose facility. The walk-out basement was designed to hold all the Scouts. The top of the building had a handicraft room or a nature center. Each camp or area has a storm shelter.

Another building project was to have decent shower facilities for everybody. With so many ladies on staff, single entrance shower and separate entrance bathroom facilities were a necessity. Everything we're building now is dual purpose.

Jay:

When did the flush toilets arrive at camp?

Ron:

In 1979 there were a few flush toilets. The toilets are a high maintenance item. We experimented with different models of toilets that would stand up to use and abuse. Sometimes they would get so clogged up it was quite a challenge to keep everything open and flowing. The Buckskin lodge had a women's and men's bathroom. The original shower houses were crude wooden structures. Over several years, it slowly progressed. Now every camp has a central shower facility for the leaders and the staff, some located above a storm shelter. The shower facility in Buckskin has ten separate individual stalls and a laundry facility with a couple of washers and dryers for the adult campers and staff to use. The Scouts use the campsite latrines and bathe in the lake.

To attract campers to Camp these days, all those improvements are necessary. If you convince the leaders that they can be comfortable at camp, the Troops will come. It's always been a competitive reality to get Troops to go to camp.

Jay: Did you have to put in sanitary waste disposal for all these facilities?

Ron:

Yes, we had to put in a new septic system with a drain field that was up-to-code. Our excavator that did all our work was a licensed installer of septic systems. He would pull the necessary permits from the County. The size of the system was dependent on numbers of users. That was up to the excavator to get all that done.

Jay:

Camp bathrooms, showers, septic systems and drain-fields had to be a massive cost to the Council.

Ron:

Yes, it was costly, and those costs occurred over several years. A certain amount of each annual budget is designated for these improvements. Every camp now has separate girls and boys single entrance showers and bathrooms. The buildings exterior looks rustic and the interior has modern facilities.

The latrines created their own set of problems. They had a sealed vault to catch the solids. Sometimes the solids would need to be pumped out, and we had to pump water in to liquefy the solids. That was a messy, smelly job.

Jay:

Did your daughters work on the staff?

Ron:

For five years, both Mindy and Erin have worked on the Many Point Staff. Mindy worked in the Buckskin Trading Post. Another year she was a COPE instructor. She also helped in the Dining Hall. Erin was an Ad Building Aide; taught handicraft merit badge in Buckskin and also worked in the Ten Chief's Trading Post.

Jay:

If you were to write a job description for hiring a new ranger, what would you include?

Ron:

In no particular order, I'd say, be familiar with mechanics, carpentry and light construction. Be a people person; getting along with all the staff and keep the respect of the volunteers. Because of the variety of jobs that come your way, it would be helpful to be a jack of all trades (master of all things). It was also beneficial for having a Scouting background.

Jay:

Which project excited you the most?

Ron:

I was most proud of working on the new Maintenance building. Bob Gagner asked me to help design everything needed for the building; it's size, layout, heating system, power tools, everything. The old building had a wood stove to heat it in the off-season, and it was always cold in that building. It lasted fifty years, and the needs outgrew the outdated space. The new building with tall ceilings, safe working spaces, thermostatically controlled heat, and a heated floor is greatly appreciated.

Jay:

What I remember about the old building were the large bins to hold nails, screws, and supplies. I always thought I'd like my workroom to have that kind of organization. I appreciated everything had a place and was in its place.

Ron:

I kept the hardware bins, plumbing supplies bins, and wooden benches. They are still part of the shop today.

I've always been proud to have the opportunity to work at Many Point. When I retired, at the closing banquet, Bob Gagner surprised me. They dedicated the maintenance building to me with my name on it: Ron Schroeder Maintenance Building. It was a very emotional time for me. The shop was my home, where I worked all winter long.

Now, of course, all the other new buildings at camp we take a lot of pride in all of them.

I return to camp regularly as a Volunteer Ranger.

Jay:

Thanks for your service to Many Point and this interview