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Why Camp Midvale Still Matters to Me!

This is about my personal experiences working on the project to save the oldest surviving American Nature Friends Camp on the East Coast, Camp Midvale in Ringwood, New Jersey.



Memorial stone at the Highlands Pool

First, a bit about my history. My parents, Nelly and Erwin Adamietz, and my uncle Robert Sokolski were members of the Nature Friends until it dissolved on the East Coast of the U.S. Camp Midvale is my home place. It was always different than any other NF Camp, because of one decision the Nature Friends made; to allow the members to build private bungalows for their families on the grounds. That made it more than a place that people visited on the weekend or for

vacations. For families who lived in New York or other cities, it became a second home where they spent every summer. Many other families, like mine, moved to New Jersey and bought homes as close to Camp Midvale as they could find, so they and their children could participate in the camp activities. As time went on, more of the summer homes were converted to year round homes. Instead of the typical, American large suburban homes, many of the houses still have the look of small rustic cabins.



Dormitory 1930s

Camp Midvale was the center of all social life and recreation for the neighborhood. When I was a child, most of the neighborhood surrounding the camp was German speaking. During our school vacations, we went to the pool every single day, and didn't go home until it was time for supper. As the years went by, the children who grew up there formed close friendships. For a child, it was paradise.



Cabins on the grounds (photo taken in 2012)

We had the pool to swim in, the woods to wander in, many other children to play with, and we were free to roam because there were no strangers, we knew and trusted everyone. Later on as we grew up, we found out about the problems that our parents had, the fears of FBI investigations, the McCarthy blacklist, the arguments about what role the Nature Friends should play in politics. But in my case, and I think many others, this was all hidden from us. I thought it was the most wonderful place in the world. We belonged to it, and it belonged to us. Even as a child I knew how lucky we were and felt sorry for others who didn't have what we had.

Now I am going to skip to the present day. I still have ties of friendship with many people that I grew up with in Camp Midvale. Even if we see each other rarely, because of our shared backgrounds we can speak to each other in a kind of shorthand. We know each other inside out. But since my parents sold their home near Camp Midvale in 2002, I would only visit once or twice a year, for our annual reunion at the pool, or perhaps to take a hike.



Former dormitory building Camp Midvale, then Weis Center

Although the name was now “Weis Ecology Center” we still called it “the Camp” and we felt a sense of ownership, even though it belonged to the New Jersey Audubon Society.

I was shocked to find out last year that the current owners of the property had shut everything down, and were planning to demolish the buildings. It was so disappointing to find that a so-called ‘conservation’ organization would be willing to destroy something so beautiful, which was the lifetime work of so many people. But the problem was money. NJ Audubon could not afford to continue running the Camp, and decided to give it to the State of New Jersey. The State was happy to take free land, to add it to Norvin Green State Forest which borders Camp Midvale. But they had no money to maintain buildings and demanded that the buildings be removed before they would accept the land. The more I got involved, the more I realized that my state is doing a terrible job with the historic buildings already under its control. Many old and historically important buildings, even those dating back to the Revolutionary War, are abandoned and in decrepit shape. The ones that were being cared for was mostly due to the efforts of volunteer groups, private organizations, and local governments. So I could see right away that Camp Midvale would have no chance in their hands.



Highlands Natural Pool, 2008

My activism began with a meeting I attended in November of 2013, to discuss the problem and find solutions to save the Camp, to somehow find a way to take it over, or find an organization willing to take it over and restart the children’s summer camp and ecology programs that so many in the community enjoyed. Several dozen people attended the meeting and many suggestions were thrown around. The one idea that I decided to concentrate on was the possibility of listing Camp Midvale on the Federal and New Jersey Registers of Historic Places. This does not guarantee that a building will not be torn down, but it does give some legal protections, and also has financial benefits, because it makes the property eligible for grant money, from the government and private groups interested in historic preservation. There are two steps for listing a historic property. First, the State Historic Office must decide it has some historic or cultural

interest and value, and issue a memorandum that it is eligible. Second, a nomination must be submitted. The nomination consists of a lengthy application form, and must include details about the architecture, maps, photos, a written history of the buildings and the people who built and used them, all to justify inclusion on the Historic Registers.

This effort has sent me on a wonderful adventure. In the beginning, I had no experience in the field of history or historic preservation, and no contacts. But I was determined and began calling and emailing total strangers for help. First, the blogger known as “The History Girl” published my piece about Camp Midvale on her website. This attracted some interest, and I was able to point to it when asking people to assist with the preservation effort. I contacted the state government to ask them about eligibility, the first step. To my surprise, I found out that Camp Midvale had already been listed as eligible! The State Historic Office reviewed it last July when the possibility first arose of the state taking it over, but the results were not made public until several months later. So now we could go directly to step two, the nomination.

At the same time, I begin searching for historic documents and information. I knew the history of the Camp from my childhood, but where was the written proof? I found out that the Ringwood Library had a collection of audio disks which were from Andy Lanset’s interviews with many of the original Nature Friends, done in 1987. These were used as the basis for an audio documentary which was aired on New York and New Jersey public radio. I also asked everyone I knew who was the child, or grandchild of Nature Friends for documents, assistance and contact information, and a few new documents and photos were located.¹ One family friend located a number of old issues of *The Nature Friend* monthly magazine from the 1930’s and 1940’s, which was a real find. The 50th Anniversary issue especially, from October 1945, contained many articles detailing the history of each of the American Nature Friend camps. People began to send me contact information for old Nature Friends. I found Susan Kukle, the daughter of Nature Friend Meyer Kukle, whom I had not seen in many years. Meyer had purchased the Platte Clove Nature Friends Camp in the Catskills after the Nature Friends dissolved, and Susan and her brothers still

¹ See Mary Caldwell-Kane. " Ringwood Library: Camp Midvale Grant Project." *NaturFreundeGeschichte / NatureFriendsHistory* 1.1. (2013) at: <http://geschichte.naturfreunde.org/2013/04/camp-midvale-project-2/>

own it. Susan had many more contacts with former Nature Friends. I had long telephone conversations with people in their 80's and 90's all over the country. For instance, Solveig Leslie, in Oregon, is in her 90's, but has a very good memory. Her parents, Hugo and Paula Koch, were among the founders of Camp Midvale and she had many stories to tell.

Through Susan, I also found Rolf Wittich, and he had the mother lode of old photographs! His father, Hans Wittich was an NFA member and photographer from the 1920's to 1954, and Rolf had hundreds of old photos in the form of negatives, slides, 35mm film, and photo albums. Susan and I decided we must visit Rolf and he graciously invited us to stay at his home. Rolf was raised as a Nature Friend, and he now lives a very independent life on his 300 acre farm in



Rolf Wittich and Karin (Feb. 2014)

upstate New York, at the age of 88. I made the the long drive up there, and the three of us had a wonderful time together. Because of the Nature Friends connection, I felt an immediate kinship with them, and we spent some happy hours telling each other stories about our lives, and realizing how much we had in common.

Before visiting Rolf, I was able to get the audio disks from the Ringwood Library which had interviews with Susan's father, Rolf's father and my father, Erwin Adamietz. All old Nature Friends! Of course I already knew most of my father's stories, but I was amazed to find out more about the Kukle and Wittich families. Hans Wittich was an avid mountain climber, the first to climb several peaks in the western United States and Canada in the early 1930's. A climbing route on the Grand Teton in Wyoming is named after Hans, "the Wittich Crack" because he was the first to ascend it. He, his wife Anna, and Rolf (who was 6 years old at the time) and their fellow traveler, Nature Friend Otto Stegmeier, hiked to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and back. Hans was also the Camp Chairman of the Mt. Pisgah Nature Friends Camp in New York, and kept very good records of its history and activities. Meyer Kukle was a lifelong hiker and outdoor enthusiast. He continued to participate in hiking clubs after the end of the East Coast Nature Friends, and was a leader of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference for many years.

The Kukle family has a strong attachment to Platte Clove. Meyer and his wife had their wedding (which my uncle remembers attending in 1951) at the Platte Clove Camp. It was due to him that the Camp, which they now call “Kukle Mountain House” and the surrounding land has been preserved in its natural state.

I came away from this visit with several old photo albums, which Rolf allowed me to borrow, and many old photo negatives on glass plates. Many of the photos show the Nature Friends activities at Camp Midvale; building the pool, building the dormitory, clearing hiking trails, sports activities, etc. I was fortunate again to find someone who is expert in photography who is converting them to digital format for me. Although the glass plates are over 80 years old, thanks to Hans’ careful labeling and storage, they are in very good condition, and we know where each photo was taken and the date it was taken. I plan to share these photos with the *Naturfreunde* in Germany, and a copy will also go to the Ringwood Public Library, which has been so helpful and interested in documenting Camp Midvale history.

Continuing with my efforts, I realized I needed people who were more knowledgeable than me to help complete the Historic Register application. The History Girl helped me again by making the suggestion to send out a call for volunteers to the email lists and websites that are read by historians and historic preservationists. I was doubtful that people would be willing to do this work for free. But to my surprise, a number of people who had never heard of the Nature Friends or Camp Midvale found it to be an interesting subject for research, and almost immediately I began to get volunteers. So I now have a team which includes people with expertise in American history, historic preservation, architectural restoration, architectural photography, mapping, and most importantly, experience in the National Register nomination process. We have not all met in person yet, but we are planning to spend a weekend taking photos and documenting the Camp Midvale site as soon as the winter snows melt. All of them are willing and eager to help.

The end of this story has not yet been written. Somehow, we must find a way to bring Camp Midvale alive again. I am getting more optimistic as time goes on and we gain new allies. Whatever the end result is, it has been a most worthwhile experience for me. I have made contacts with so many wonderful, generous people, and I have been able to preserve Nature Friends history that otherwise would have been lost.

See also: <http://www.highlandsnaturalpool.org/>

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