



PROLOGUE

By Kitt Kurtz

A few years ago, in a grocery store, I ran into a woman who was a camper that summer of 1970. She was astounded that I remembered her name, and her friend's name, and where she lived. She remembered how her friend lost her glasses when we were running through a field of high grass, and she remembered how I made them get down on their knees, fold their hands and recite in a most irreverent monotone: "St. Anthony, St. Anthony, please come around. Something is lost and cannot be found." And then we found the glasses. All those years later, that woman still carries that crazy memory.

1970 was the year I became a Junior Counselor at Camp Christopher, but to set the stage for those memories, I would have to back up to the first moment when the compelling allure of Camp Christopher first captured my heart forever.

I was a scrawny little 4th grader constrained in that daily prison of my school desk, a far worse punishment to me than what I'd read in American History books of the Pilgrim practice of locking the guilty in the stocks. My desk was intentionally situated directly in front of the teacher's desk, under the watchful eye and within a ruler's reach of one ever-looming Dominican warden. Having earned a certainly unwarranted reputation for causing "distractions," I had been assigned my particular spot. If I were guilty at all, it was of nothing more than innocent attempts to add a bit of humor to the incessantly dull and mundane routines of a Catholic school classroom.

As if the confines of classroom suffering weren't enough to crush the spirit of any child, my gender had the added torture of being forced to wear one of those interminably scratchy wool uniforms. On a hot day in May, with that wool sticking to my legs, I itched from the depths of my being. I itched to get out of that uniform. I itched to escape that desk. I itched to be outside those classrooms windows where green trees were dancing in a cool breeze, enticing me to join them, and birds were singing, flying free. My gaze was fixed outside that window, and I ached to get loose.

Just then, my spirit-wandering was abruptly interrupted by the threatening shadow of my teacher standing over me and the accompanying cacophonous crash of her yardstick on my desk top. She towered above me, regaled in her own torment, every inch of her frame covered in stifling starched linen. Only two hints of skin testified to her humanity. One was the fragment of her joyless visage – dagger-like eyes and scowling lips framed by her weighty wimple. The other bit of visible skin was displayed in those formidable hands. No one was out of her reach. She could be an unruly kid senseless with a dead-on pitch of a chalkboard eraser. Having been on the receiving end many a time, I can attest that it left my head spinning enough to keep me dazed and silenced for the remainder of the school day.

There she stood, ominously holding a stack of green and white brochures. It was then that my fate took a turn toward great fortune. Sister Mary Michael George passed her bundle of brochures down the rows, and I was immediately mesmerized. They were Camp Christopher application forms with pictures of kids swimming, hiking, fishing, shooting bows and arrows, and, ahhhhhhh...riding horses! Oh what heaven! Could there be such a paradise? Camp Christopher lured me with a powerful force, a crystalline call to adventure. I had to get there. It was destiny.

It took some dedicated finagling and some calculated manipulating to convince my parents to sign me up. I waited until my grimy little brothers were pitching a football across the living room, knocking over the lamp where my worn and weary mother, buried in the pages of a paperback novel, was trying to escape the chaos of a house full of kids. Just as she was expounding her obligatory speech, “You kids are enough to make a preacher swear,” I pleaded in a most sympathetic tone, “You so deserve a little peace and quiet. If only there were some way,” I sighed plaintively, “that you could have even *one* less child here.”

Well, with that subliminal message firmly planted, and the Camp Christopher brochure left strategically on my parent’s bedroom dresser, it wasn’t long before I had my bags packed with everything on the checklist. Flashlight. Check. Raincoat. Check. Sweatshirt. Check. One skirt for morning Mass. Check. Chapel veil. Check. Sleeping bag. Pillow. Check. Check.

The ride to Camp was a wondrous, thrilling, prepositional pilgrimage - on the road for the journey, over the hills, up and down, between the trees, through the front gate, onto the gravel path. Ahhh! Camp Christopher. Beautiful Bath, Ohio. Home of *Camping at its Finest*.

I unfurled my sleeping bag in Cabin 6, Poncie Dell. Carole Young was the kindly unit leader, and she shared her counselor quarters with the infamous Sheila Mary Murphy, aka Sam, a living legend with an indomitable spirit and a charismatic charm radiating a contagious zest for life.

When my parents finally left, I perched outside the cabin on a large rock with my red-haired troll doll in hand. (It was a 60’s thing. What can I say?) It was about then that I had the great fortune to be “adopted” by two veteran campers, Kathy O’Neill and Sue Lee Urig. The pair had been coming to camp together since they were babies and had progressed through the ranks from Cabin One to Cabin Six.

From that moment on, the seasons of my life changed from winter, summer, spring and fall to “waiting for Camp” and “being at Camp”. Kathy, Sue and I sent letters back and forth (in the olden days before email) during the school year, that part of life

that intruded on Camp that one had to endure in torment until the summer arrived. Sue's letters came on pastel blue rice paper, Kathy's on purple stationary. We spent the whole school year writing about our one week at Camp.

As we got older, we managed to convince our parents that we *had* to go for two weeks. Kathy, Sue, and I became regulars of the last 2 weeks of Girl's Season. In those days, the summer started with 5 weeks of Boys' Season and ended with 5 weeks for the girls. Every week at camp had its own culture, its own ebb and flow, its own "regulars". In the late '60s, the Baby Boom generation was at its peak, and Camp Christopher was overflowing every week with cots and extra beds wherever they could be wedged into the cabins without violating fire safety laws.

We progressed through the ranks. There was Cabin 8 with Mary T. Etowski; Cabin 8 again with Melanie "Melba Toast" Koslowski. There was Cabin 9 with Sheila Mary Murphy. We made it to cabin James Gibbons the year that there were so many campers that two huge army tents were set up outside the cabin, and we had 4 counselors: Margie and Lucy Morris, Barb Breiding and Marie Anton. In those days, girls kept coming back to Camp year after year, even past the age of 16, 17, and even 18, hoping for a chance to get hired as a Junior Counselor. And in those days, the girl JC's didn't even get paid. They just came, hoping for the chance to scrub dishes, empty slop buckets and clean toilets all for the thrill of being part of Camp.

Kathy's turn came in 1969; Sue would have to wait until 1971. I was invited to become part of the staff of 1970, joining a remarkable group of women I had long idolized in my years as a camper. It still amazes me that so many memories have been forever preserved from just 5 short weeks of that summer of 1970.

I am ever grateful for the opportunity to have worked at Camp Christopher. Through the whole winter that followed that summer of 1970, I religiously wore my staff jacket. No matter how cold it got, I wore that skimpy summer jacket and adamantly insisted against my mother's pleadings, "The spirit of Christopher keeps me warm."

I served on the staff from 1970 until 1976. I am so grateful to Girls' Season Program Director Kay O'Malley, Camp Director Ray Thomas, and CYO Executive Director Jim Sovacool who saw something in me worthy of the calling. I count myself greatly blessed to have had such great fortune in my life to be part of such an incredible summer place.

Every summer of my life since then, I get this aching longing for Camp. When I had children of my own, I took them to Family Camp, and they caught camp fever too. When my kids were old enough, they went to Resident Camp, and I became that annoying parent who never wanted to leave on Sunday. My daughters eventually served on the staff. By then Camp Director Herb McGuire and Big Jim Sovacool had graciously established a most generous event in which parents of staff were invited to come for an evening Mass and cookout. It was always hard to leave. One summer when my daughters were still on staff, I came every morning to play my guitar for Mass. I was quite amazed to find people still singing the same songs— *Easy Come, Easy Go; Have Fun; Happiness Runs in a Circular Motion; To Everything, Turn, Turn, Turn*.

Camp Christopher was so influential in my life that I started a school with the goal in mind to capture what it was about Camp that was so wonderful. I tried to replicate that "joie de vivre", the fun, the friendships, the sense of freedom, the call to be part of

something greater than self. I think I came about as close as any school can come to capturing that life-giving essence.

I sit here on this summer day in August, and, after all these years, part of my heart is still back at Camp Christopher. I loved the rhythms there: people slowly rising up in the mornings, guitar masses, the sounds of the screen doors slamming, announcements over the PA, singing in the Dining Hall, the sounds of children's voices echoing off the lake and rising up through the trees, the quiet lull just before dinner, night programs like talent shows and coffee houses and sock hops, candlelight night services, rainy days when everyone would gather inside the cabins and tell stories, the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. I loved sitting quietly around a campfire late into the morning hours, watching the last glowing embers fade, then flare up again with a valiant flame of light when the breeze stirred.

That campfire image is a most appropriate metaphor for the life lessons, the enduring friendships, and the memories of days at Camp Christopher. All these years have passed, but on any given summer evening, a cool breeze blows and the trees dance, the moon glistens, and the embers of those days are stirred like a gentle flame, a warm glow deep within that cannot be extinguished.

Camp Christopher
Camp Christopher was founded in 1924. The present site and facilities were first occupied in 1954. New buildings and additional areas have been developed with each succeeding year so that today Camp Christopher rates as one of the finest in the country.

Camp Christopher meets the highest standards in camping. All safety precautions are taken at camp.

Camp Christopher is accredited by the National Catholic Camping Association and the American Camping Association.

Camp Christopher takes campers to a classroom of the panorama of nature, great out-of-doors, where they see meet, first hand, the very earth which we came and by which we live, setting of soil and stone, of hill and brook and lake, sun, moon, and birds, animals, fish, flowers and all these mysteries the work of the Creator.

Campers at Camp Christopher live in a world of adventure and learn by doing — to lift their hearts in prayer and song, enjoy the arts of handicraft, a trip along nature's trail and a horseback journey through wooded lands, swim, boat and fish and take part in native dances and shows, engage in games and sporting events.

Campers at Camp Christopher are trained to treasure companionship and to develop leadership and talents, to advance spiritually, socially and physically.

CAMP CHRISTOPHER
Camp Christopher is located at the corner of Ira and Hametown Roads in Bath, Ohio, one and one-half miles west of Cleveland-Massillon Rd. Use Wheatley Rd. exit #50, off I-77 if approaching from I-77 or I-271. Camp Christopher is situated in the very heart of the scenic, wooded and rolling countryside of Summit County, Ohio.

NATIONAL CATHOLIC CAMPING ASSOCIATION

camping at its finest...