

Photo of the Month

Camp Joyzelle

An Art and Recreational Camp



In 1920s Little Rock, Miss Iris Armstrong ran her “School of Expression,” a private dramatic academy. One of her goals was to establish a summer camp at which girls and young women could be given instruction in drama and the arts, and at the same time provide wholesome outdoor experiences in sports such as riding and swimming. One day she learned that the famous “Coin” Harvey of Monte Ne was in town and she sought his advice. Harvey was immediately enthusiastic, she said, and commented that he knew the ideal location.

In February 1923 Armstrong leased about 100 acres of land at the west end of Big Springs Lake, near Harvey’s home and the Monte Ne train depot. She called the camp “Joyzelle” for the poet/playwright Maurice Maeterlinck’s heroine in his play of the same name, published in 1903. At the time such summer camps for girls were common in the East, but not so much in Arkansas. Joyzelle’s costs catered primarily to somewhat well-to-do girls, including debutantes from Little Rock, Dallas, and other Southern cities.

The first trainload of girls arrived in June 1923, some 35 girls in total. Some stayed only a week, others were there for the summer. The younger girls were ages 8 to 13, while the older ones were 14 to 17. College students served as counselors.

The first summer the girls lived in tents. The next year 19 screened cabins were built, those for younger girls at the foot of the bluff, and those for older girls at the top, where they were called “hilltoppers.” Each of the cabins was named after a Greek or mythical goddess (e.g., Daphne, Pandora, Penelope, Diana). The main lodge included a library, kitchenette, and a large recreation hall with a huge fireplace on the main floor; a handicrafts shop, art studio, and puppet theater downstairs; and a theater and costume rooms upstairs. Other camp buildings included a large studio for dancing and dramatics, a dining hall, an infirmary, and shower rooms. The campers may have been well-to-do but the facilities were perhaps less formal. Linda (Leiper) Cummings, who attended Joyzelle in the 1930s, remembers straw mattresses, cold-water showers, and outhouses.



“Coin” Harvey had a good relationship with the camp until his death in 1936. During the camp’s first week he arranged a number of social events and automobile trips for the campers. Harvey himself even helped supervise the pitching of the first tents. Programs were often given on the lawn of Monte Ne’s hotels and frequently on the “pyramids,” Harvey’s amphitheater. Girls who attended Joyzelle in the early 30s remember Harvey watching some of their performances.

Camp activities included swimming, canoeing, hiking, horseback riding, games, and tennis. Sometimes speakers were brought in and programs were presented in the lodge. Two major camp activities were drama and dance. Theatrical performances, such as the “Knights of the Round Table,” were a mainstay of Joyzelle. Helen Armstrong, Iris’ sister, taught dance, with the girls dressed in gauzy, flowing “Grecian” robes. Occasionally the campers went on bus trips, including trips into Rogers.

The Sunday evening fire-lighting services were a highlight of each girl’s Joyzelle experience. From atop the mountain came the Indian call (“Wa-tah-ho-tah-ho!”), sung by a line of campers. On the middle level stood the torch lighters, while in the valley the other campers echoed the Indian call. This was the call to the friendship fire service. After singing the Indian folk song *Wakonda*, the campers and counselors met at the amphitheater and formed a circle. Other songs were sung, an evening prayer was given, and there was talk about friendship and happiness. The torch bearer lit the bonfire and, as the flames leaped skyward, the campers sang their fire song. Then the names of campers who had won special recognition were read. Each camper honored stepped to the fire, lit a torch, and held it aloft. The final rite was a gathering around the fire of the girls who were to leave for home before the next campfire. Each threw a twig into the fire in honor of the girls she wanted to remember. The camp hymn closed the service, followed by the singing of *Taps*.

The Armstrongs retired in 1956, but Joyzelle continued on. Mary Powell of Little Rock was the next owner and director. By that time there were two summer sessions with over 200 campers from 33 states. There

were 19 counselors, all teachers or college students, as well as a registered nurse, bookkeeper, riding master and instructor, head dietician, and swimming instructor. The staff also included six African-American women from the domestic science department of "a colored college" as kitchen helpers.

Camp activities, in addition to those mentioned in the 1930s, included archery, badminton, ping pong, basketball, volleyball, handicrafts, scenic trips through the Ozark territory, and a once-a-week movie. Non-sectarian church services were held Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings were "cabin night" when the campers met in their cabins to plan their own activities for the week.

Through the Depression, World War II, and the Korean War, Camp Joyzelle survived. In the early 1960s, however, the Land Acquisition Office of the Army Corps of Engineers acquired a part of the camp that was to be inundated by the waters of Beaver Lake. Since it was no longer possible to continue camp operations, the remaining 75 acres were sold.

Today most of Camp Joyzelle lies beneath the waters of Beaver Lake. But if you stand by the lake at Monte Ne today and listen very closely on a warm summer's evening, you just might hear a soft "Wa-tah-ho-tah-ho!" echo from the hilltops.

First image from an ad for Camp Joyzelle in the May 1928 issue of *The Dixie Magazine* (Neg. #N019583).

Second image: Camp Joyzelle's Penelope cabin group at the Monte Ne amphitheater, summer 1959. Courtesy of Paula Thompson. (Neg. #N004174)