

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

Rushford Reflections by Bill Sharick

I stood looking over the pond and wondered...where had all that time gone? High school, then college, and finally a career with the Department of Environmental Conservation. One thing was imminently clear: my experiences at Camp Rushford had made a tremendous impact on all those years.

My grandfather was an avid hunter and fisherman. Some of my most vivid memories are of the large catches of the Lake Erie blue pike he would bring home from all-night fishing trips. Sometimes he even took me along.

In those days, hunters had to register at a check station very early in the morning. Conservation Department wildlife technicians registered the hunters and handed out hunting permits. It was the first time I came across fellows who worked in the field of wildlife management. That's the kind of job I want, I thought to myself.

When I was 14, my dad told me there was an outdoor camp for kids run by the Conservation Department. At that time, camp was just for boys. It was one week long, cost \$35, and there would be classes in fisheries, wildlife, forestry, hunting, trapping and boating. It sounded like just the thing for me.

I remember on a Sunday afternoon in July, my mom, dad and I drove south in our green 1960 Chevrolet from our house near Buffalo to Camp Rushford in Allegany County. Shortly after I arrived, other guys showed up and we were assigned to our bunk houses. There were fellows from all over western New York.

The main meeting room was very rustic with all sorts of tanned skins and animal mounts. In it, I felt transported back in

time to one of the wilderness camps of the Adirondacks.

Bunk rooms were partitioned off with two double bunks per section and there was a common bathroom with multiple sinks and stalls. The showers used hot water supplied by a wood-fired boiler. The counselors were responsible for keeping the fire burning. As I recall, the water was either freezing cold or scalding hot.

Outside, beyond the pond was a caged area where the counselors kept a red fox. Every day, we'd go down and watch the animal being fed. I remember talking to a counselor about college during one of those feeding sessions. He told me he went to Cornell University and was studying wildlife science—which sounded like a good match for me.

Camp days were filled with talks and hands-on lessons in woodlot care, fish and game management, streamside erosion control work, fly-fishing, hunting and trapping. Conservation officers, forestry, and fish and wildlife technicians also spoke in our classes.

We took two official state courses, Boating Safety and Hunter Training. As part of the Hunter Training course, we were allowed to shoot .22 rifles and shotguns at the range located beyond the bunk house. Written tests were given at the end of each course and I passed both. I had a perfect score in Hunter Training; as a prize I received a one-year subscription to the *Conservationist*. I've received every issue since. I—and others—also received a small yellow card certifying completion of the Hunter Training course. I still have mine.

At week's end we all received certificates proclaiming our completion of the



A typical DEC camp in the 1960s.

training courses at the conservation camp. Mine is framed and still occupies an important place on my office wall: next to my Cornell University diploma and my Certified Wildlife Biologist papers from The Wildlife Society.

About 15 years ago, I attended a meeting at Camp Rushford. It was the first time I visited since I was a camper. When I arrived, I was shocked to see the whole place had shrunk. The buildings were much smaller than I remembered; the lake was just a little pond, the expansive ball field was the right size for T-Ball, and the big shooting range was more like a suburban lawn completely surrounded by woody vegetation.

After wandering around a bit and thinking about that week in the summer of 1964, I realized that what I saw now didn't matter. The things I learned and people I met there helped set the stage for my career as a wildlifer.

In that respect, Camp Rushford will always be a big place in my mind.

Wildlife Biologist **Bill Sharick** recently retired after a 36-year career with DEC.

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