

# VNHS Summer Camps from the Beginning to the Present

*by Kitty Castle*



*A hike led by Bert Brink at Cinnabar Basin, 1980. Photo by Roy Edgell.*

Camps have been an important tradition since 1918, providing magical experiences for our members. They have been held all over the province from the west coast Broken Islands, Cape Scott on Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlottes, to the Rockies in the east. We have been to Kluane in the Yukon, and to Waterton, Larch Valley, Lake Louise and the Tonquin Valley near Jasper in Alberta. The first camp was at Savary Island, and this year we will be going 1,000 km north of Vancouver to Smithers.

Camps have been offered every year, except for 6 years during the '30s and '40s due to the Great Depression and Second World War, and one cancellation due to forest fires. Several favourite locations have had return visits: the Cinnabar area (7 camps), Garibaldi Park (6 camps), Bootahnie [Botanie] Valley north of Lytton (5 camps), Manning Park (4 camps), and the Tenquille area north of

Pemberton (3 camps). Many of our former camp locations are now, however, within the boundaries of Provincial Parks and Protected Areas: Cathedral Provincial Park, Joe Lake in the Snowy Protected Area, Garibaldi Provincial Park, Spruce Lake /Cinnabar Protected Area, Kalamalka Lake Provincial Park and the Stein River watershed. We can no longer take large groups into many of these areas and now need to look further afield. Location choices have become a treasure hunt, with the Internet and Google Earth providing invaluable clues.

Environmental concerns now govern our camping style. We no longer cook with wood but bring in propane in 100 lb cylinders. At alpine camps, the much-loved campfires are a distant memory because of forest fire concerns and the wish to leave the campsites as undisturbed as possible. We are using



*Phil Edgell, Roy and Tanis Pursell climbing Mt. Eiffel, Larch Valley, 1962. Photo by Roy Edgell.*

more environmentally friendly products from shampoo and soapsuds to reusable lunch boxes. We protect heavy traffic areas such as in the cook tent with cocoa matting, and we also peg down plastic snow fencing on sensitive trails, as, for example, at Monica Meadows. Gone are the days of cutting down trees for awning props or biffy building: our well-constructed biffy and shower enclosures are placed over their own plastic pipe frames. Solar shower bags are now suggested on the recommended equipment list.

At present, we aim to offer two years of alpine remote camps, and one "drive-in" camp every third year. The latter offers limited accommodation for those who are unable or prefer not to tent. The first drive-in camp may have been Denman Island in 1952, referred to as the "Sissy Camp," where "Car owners can drive to the very entrance of their tent ... and [there are] no tough hikes but rather long gentle strolls" (Merilees 63).

Traditionally, our week-long camps have been held during the last week of July or the first week of August. Due to

demand in the '70s, at least two separate camps at different locations were held during the year but this involved too much organizing, and subsequently the Society reverted back to one main camp location each summer. For some of the years since 2000, however, we have been able to run two camps back-to-back at the same location. This depends very much on the availability of the cooking staff, camp managers and hiking leaders. Numbers of campers have varied. There were 91 members and cooking staff at the Shulaps Camp northwest of Lillooet in 1969. Some camps had as few as 20 participants. Now, 50 members is generally the limit for a camp. Such a large group may sound intimidating to a newcomer but everyone is made to feel very welcome, and tents can be pitched in tight groups of friends or in a more dispersed manner. Registration fills up very quickly in January of each year.

We have had numerous camp managers, some of them serving year after year. VNHS founder John Davidson started the first camp in 1918, and then went on to manage 17 more; Dorothy



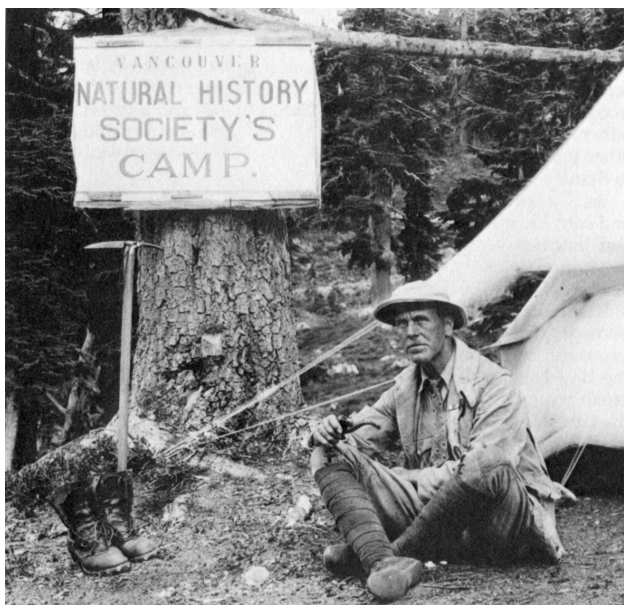
*The VNHS dining tent [awning] at the 1927 Garibaldi camp.  
Photo by David Martin or Philip Timms.*

Pollitt led 16 canoe trips between 1977 and 1991; Bert Brink managed 10 camps, and Lorne Payne was in charge of 9 camps. Bob Harris managed 3 camps, and in addition was an outstanding hiking leader and mapmaker at other camps. We have many of his detailed and beautifully penned maps and trail descriptions in our camp files.

Camp organization has greatly changed over the years; nonetheless, camps have always been run by volunteers. Originally, one director was solely responsible for all arrangements but, since 1982, the camp committee meets throughout the year planning locations and logistics. In the old days, an advance party of up to 15 people would go into the campsite two days early to set up the awnings for cooking and eating, dig the biffies and slop pit, and cut firewood. Nowadays, for our Alpine camps, a small group does a “recce” – goes into the camp area the previous year to check out suitability – and then does it again, two or three weeks immediately prior to the camp to check on snow and approach-road

conditions. Then, on a Sunday, all campers assemble early at the helipad to park their cars, drop off their heavy luggage, walk up to the camp – typically, a two-hour hike – and set up camp together. Many hands are needed to put up the large dining tent (18 x 40ft) and cook tent (14 x 24ft) both of which were purchased by Dan Phelps in 1992. Camp equipment, stored during the year in a New Westminster Public Storage locker, includes many rolls of chicken wire used at some camps as a porcupine deterrent around car tires and other rubber parts. It was last used at Monica Meadows in 2006.

Helicopters replaced packhorses, in part because packhorses were not always reliable – they were known to turn up very late, and once turned up in the wrong place. Bert Brink described an interesting event at Cathedral Lakes in 1964 when the packhorses were deliberately driven away overnight, with suspicion falling on a rival horse-packer formerly used by the VNHS. Most of the horses were rounded up but it took a week or so before all were accounted for,



*John Davidson at a VNHS camp in Garibaldi, possibly in 1927 or 1928. Photo: Philip Timms. Courtesy of Edna Davidson.*

and clearly made breaking camp a manager's nightmare (Peacock 79).

It seems that helicopters were first used at the 1966 Kokanee camp. They are not without their own particular problems, which include the weather, being commandeered for forest fires, and the experience or inexperience of the pilot (e.g., a load was once set down at the wrong lake). The helicopters have dropped gear a couple of times. At the 1968 Black Tusk Meadows Camp, as Roy and Helen Edgell remember, a good portion of the food supplies dropped 100 m onto a forested mountainside owing to a faulty helicopter hook: 10 kg of carrots became an instant 10 kg of red dust when it hit the ground. But the wayward net load was located, and Helen and Roy, who was Camp Manager, drove back to Vancouver for a re-supply and arranged a helicopter pickup of the dropped load. At McGillivray in 1996, a camp on a swampy meadow, some items including Chief Cook Angie Berger's tent and sleeping bag fell out of the net and were only spotted on the way out. But replacements

were found and Angie took these mishaps in her stride (*Discovery* Fall 2002 31(2): 5-6 and personal communication). Nowadays, access is generally much easier than the 8-hour hike into Cathedral Lakes in 1951, or the drive to the 1946 Manning Park camp via Merritt and Princeton, three years before the Hope-Princeton highway was opened. In 2003 at Ghost Peak, camp access was by chopper only, and, for some of us campers, it was an all-too short, albeit scenic, experience. By now, some of our members have become experienced swamper, that is, they set up and hook the loads for the helicopter at one end and receive the loads at the other.

Our recent camps cater primarily to adults, but there have always been some children, including the very young Bruce Brink at the Denman Island camp (1952): "camp this year welcomed infant Bruce Brink who proved to be an infant of outstanding charm and energy" (Merilees 63). Sixteen young people came to the Tyaughton Camp in 1965. There has been a succession of camps with Edgell family members over the



*The 1918 VNHS camp at Savary Island, in the Strait of Georgia. The woman at the left wears a pair of bloomers, an essential part of female camping costume in this era. Botanical specimens, such as those held by the woman in the centre, were often displayed in a special tent at camp where they were identified, photographed, and discussed. From their inception, VNHS camps were intended to be both relaxing and educational. Photo by Elizabeth and S. Curtis Johns. VNHS Archives.*

years, continuing up to the present day. Roy Edgell started coming in 1959, managed several camps, brought his family and grandsons, and returned most recently with his by-now grownup son Phil, to Monica Meadows in 2006.

Life in camp has changed considerably since the early days. In 'Camps of the Twenties,' Bert Brink describes what it was like: "In the [Davidson] camps of the '20s, '30s and early '40s, Sunday was a day of comparative peace and quiet. After breakfast there was a brief, essentially simple, religious service with a short statement from Professor Davidson or Mr. Connor, with contributions from other campers; attendance was not compulsory but only a few did not attend....Discipline, which would not be tolerated today, was embodied, I believe, in the use of the whistle – whistle calls for reveille, mealtimes, etc. There was, also, *insistence on camper attention* on field trips and discussions. If the trip was scheduled as a botany trip then botany it was, not birds or mammals or geology" (Peacock 39–

40).

The aim has always been to offer the camp at a reasonable cost to members. The 1953 Glacier National Park camp cost \$40 including the return rail fare to Glacier (Merilees 67). Now, helicopter support is one of the most costly items in organizing an alpine camp, and with increasing fuel costs in mind, we have replaced most of the older heavy equipment, such as the wooden tables, with lighter equipment.

Personal gear has also become much lighter, and if travelling by helicopter, may not exceed 20 kg or 45 lb, actually more than in the past. Bert Brink described equipment and procedures of the 20s and 30s: essential personal gear was laid out for a rough inspection and weighed on a spring balance with the then-limit of 35 lbs. The weight limit was important as gear was going in on horses, and horse-packers were paid by the pound (Peacock 41). Nowadays Alpenstock staffs have been replaced by adjustable hiking poles, the heavy hemp ropes by lighter synthetic ropes, and the



*Pack horses at Larch Valley, 1962. Photo by Roy Edgell.*

puttees, described by Bert as “yards-long strips of thin woollen cloth about three inches wide, which were wrapped spirally around the leg starting at the ankle and ending above the calf”, have long since disappeared and been replaced by Goretex gaiters. Hudson Bay Blankets preceded down sleeping bags, and large blanket pins kept them in place; “it was a bit of an art to roll and pin blankets to retain body heat,” said Bert (Peacock 56). Before the present era of thermarests, some campers slept on the ground or on heather; bough beds were widely used. Nowadays, LED headlamps make tent living much more comfortable. There is nothing to beat a warm sleeping bag on a cold night after a good day’s hiking.

Weather can sometimes prove violent. Raging torrents at Garibaldi drove campers out of their campsite in 1955. At almost every recent mountain camp, including Ghost Peak and Monica Meadows, we have had snow. Winds have up-ended the dining tent at least twice in the last few years, and everyone breathes a sigh of relief when it is put up again and securely anchored down.

Accidents will happen. In 1957, “Mrs. [Hilda] Pinder-Moss, known as Pindy,

broke her leg the evening of our arrival on Noaxe Lake, and for days lay cheerfully at her tent entrance without complaint, and rode sidesaddle 20 miles over rock and scree to the Elizabeth Mine on the way out” (Merilees 194). In 1970 at Tonquin Valley, one of the campers slipped on a steep snow patch, cracked his pelvis and dislocated his shoulder which could not readily be set back in place. He went out on horseback the next day. Both victims must have suffered very much. Nowadays, with the aid of a satellite phone, a call to the helicopter company can result in evacuation in a matter of hours, as was the case with a victim at McGillivray in 2004. Incidentally, all three invalids survived.

We now have mosquito netting and repellants but previously, Bert Brink noted, “some of our members put on pine tar glazes over their faces and hands; after a week the whiskers grew through – what a sight!” (Merilees 194).

There is always some form of evening entertainment at camp: skits, music, singing and story telling. There must have been extra special memories created at the 1963 Crown Lakes Camp with the arrival at dusk in a canoe of Ron

McKay of the Canadian Wildlife Service who treated us, as Bert Brink tells us, "to the skirl of his bagpipes" (Peacock 78). At McGillivray Pass in 2004, we had duets from Mike Castle on banjo and 8-year-old Felix Parkinson on fiddle with tunes such as "Whisky before breakfast". There have been plays such as the thrice-performed botanical *A Midsummer Night's Dream As You Like It* (*Discovery* Fall 2001 30: 48, 60-63), and poems such as Marian Coope's tongue twister "The Naming of Peaks" at Blowdown Camp last year (*Discovery* Fall 2007, 36(2): 38-39).

Essential to the well-being of all campers are our cooks, and we have been mostly fortunate over the years. Mention was made of "Flapjack" at one of the earlier camps in Garibaldi, who, when he struck for higher wages, was challenged by Professor Davidson to walk out alone. He stayed (Merilees 196). But then there was a long and happy association with Angie Berger who cooked for 30 years up to 1998, as Roy Edgell remembers (*Discovery* Fall 2002 31(2): 5-6). When she started, each camper provided his or her own food for the cook to prepare, a logistical nightmare to which she soon put a stop. Lance Weisser, who cooked for seven summers and also found time for watercolour painting, followed Angie. Now we have Jane Taylor from McBride who is both an excellent cook and very cheerful. Novice campers will be surprised at the fresh, delicious and varied menus that emerge from a few burners and a griddle, with no ovens. Both dry ice and regular ice in our 23 coolers keep our perishables in good condition and act as camp fridges.

Possibly because of the number of campers, I have found only one report of a bear (in 1974 at Jesmond) coming into camp and causing a problem. This does not mean that campers, especially on the first night, do not imagine all sorts of creatures at their tent door. One grizzly came wandering close to camp at

Cinnabar in 2001, and a group of four grizzlies were spotted by photographers in the valley below camp at Ghost Peak in 2003. Two hikers had a close encounter at the narrow pass overlooking Ghost Peak camp, with fresh grizzly prints in the snow. This explained why the resting hikers were not there waiting for the main group to return to camp! At Assiniboine, three campers had an up-close and personal encounter with a large male grizzly on a trail, recorded by Marian Coope as "Incident at Camp II" (*Discovery* Winter 2000 29(2): 33).

Reflecting on summer camps brings back many images including meadows, tumbling streams, mimulus, grass-of-Parnassus, asters and lupins, mariposa lilies, familiar faces, and early morning breakfasts with an essential bowl of hot porridge while waiting for the sun to reach the dining tent. Hikes can take you to the mountaintops with the resulting feeling of being on top of the world, or hours can be spent very slowly exploring around camp with certain botanists. It is your choice and you should give it a try!

*Kitty Castle has been a VNHS member since 1996, went to her first camp at Ghost Peak in 2003 and now chairs the Camp Committee. She is a founding Director of the North Shore Black Bear Society and continues her involvement in educating the public about black bears.*

## References

Full camp reports can be found in *Discovery* starting in 1997 and in the reference material listed below. *Discovery* reports of recent camps can also be found on the camp website.

Peacock, Jim. 1993. *The Vancouver Natural History Society, 1918-1993*. The Vancouver Natural History Society.

Merilees, Bill, compiler. 2005. "Selected Excerpts from the VNHS 'Bulletin' from 1943 to 1971." The Vancouver Natural History Society.