

#10 Towne E

Notes on Wally Tomchek who died December 29 1997

After I had graduated from Waupaca High School in 1956, I began to hear of a new music teacher, Mr. Tomchek. The music program at Waupaca High had been set on its conservative ear by a new progressive style. The students were performing lively entertaining music and people were talking with enthusiasm about the change. One day to my surprise Wally Tomchek appeared at the Rec Hall talking to Skipper. At that time I was working with the Crafts Program with Chuck Cooper. We were introduced to Wally who told us that he would be coming to Camp Waupaca next season.

The Dramatics Program had been very limited to that date. We had a counselor (I forget his name) that lead the camp in songs, directed a minor skit for parents week end, and helped Skipper entertain on rainy days. This man would also entertain the counselors at the piano in the Rec Hall with songs he must have learned in a sporting house some evenings. Wally brought a new and enjoyable style to the camp.

Skipper had an old concertina in the attic of the "white house". It had been silent for many years. With a little oil and elbow grease Wally cleaned it up. With an ancient song book from the camp library and the concertina the mighty Titanic was raised to sink again and again by boys who had no idea of the tragedy.

The old piano in the mess hall had been purchased for \$25.00 dollars at an auction. The poor thing has suffered the pangs of damp storage in the winter, no services of a piano tuner and the pounding of many non musical campers. The ivories from the keys were missing, the sound board cracked, the felts eaten by moths and the piano tuner deemed it not repairable. Wally found two piano that had been well cared for. One was on sale for \$40.00 and the other \$35.00. Skipper balked at first over this large an expenditure for an item that could easily be found for \$10.00. Wally persevered and as far as I know these two piano are the ones still in use at the camp. As for the old ones, the super fourth of July bon fire was a little larger that year.

Next was the addition of the "Great Hammond Organ". Wally left his teaching job in Waupaca. He was too big for the little town. Besides that he had lost his girl friend at the time and needed a change to help him out of his depression. He put most of his belongings in storage and brought his organ to Camp Waupaca. Can you imagine the effects of having an instrument that would actually play in key. Being an electrical devise, the organ could be made loud enough to drowned out the off key vocalists in the Mess Hall. The organ was stored at camp for two years and was used for the waterfront production of "Petered Out" and possibly "The Music Man".

The first production that I can remember is "Robin Hood and His Yohedi". This of course was a spoof on life at Camp Waupaca. Wally, Chuck, and I wrote and rewrote the script so as to offend most every one in camp. Instead of Maid Marion we had our own Maid Lorretta. I build a lot of the scenery under the direction of Wally, we all painted it. One night Wally and I painted the base colors until one in the morning, Chuck stayed up the rest of the night doing the finishing touches. One of the innovations of this play was the forest curtain cut out of Skipper's canvas he used to cover things in the old barn for winter storage. Had the play not been a success with the parents, this would have ended the careers of three Waupaca counselors.

Also Robin Hood required steps. As always the Drama Department was short on funds. "No one uses these old ping pong tables" said Wally. So the work began. After clean-up, during competition, rest hour, and into the evening Wally and I worked. At dusk the steps were complete. I started to the kitchen for the evening canteen of fruit and met Skipper. "What have you done to the ping pong tables?" Skipper asked in a low controlled voice. "We made them into steps for the play," I answered. "Come with me," Skipper commanded. As it happened those were ping pong tables that Skipper had made personally. As a part of the next weeks program there was to be an all camp ping pong tournament. When the smoke cleared, Wally and I had been put in charge of a substitute program; one that obviously did not include ping pong. Ping pong was eliminated from the Super-Dupper Relay that summer. Next year new ping pong tables were purchased, still few campers used them.

The order in which the Grand Productions of Camp Waupaca's Drama Club progressed eludes me. Following are some of the things that come to mind.

There was the golden coffin of the production of "Kufu". A live volunteer lay on a board while Wally covered him with plaster cloth. The prize for this endeavor was the role of King Kufu. Using pictures of the King Tut gold coffin, a very good facsimile was fashioned. The hit of this rather short play was the coffin. For all of his trouble the camper who played Kufu had one line. "I wish those archeologists would learn to close the door".

"Egg White and the Seven Little Fellows" took much longer to write than to perform. The most memorable part of the play for me was the "diamond mine" prop.

"Petered Out and Wendy" was performed on the beach. I had to come up with a house prop that could be constructed in seconds. The paper machie "Tic Tock" the alligator was in danger of melt down if it was exposed to the water too long so couldn't be used for rehearsal until the final one. The cast members who rowed the boat used in the play were

cast on their vocal qualities and not their seamanship. Still the production came off with a minimum of snafus. Anyway since it was an original, who was to know?

"North Terrific" was one of the most enjoyable to write. There was a lot of input from many of the counselors. Because it was about the people in the camp it struck home to most of the campers. The musical numbers are legendary among the camp alumni and thus a lasting tribute to Wally. I met with Wally during rest hour in front of the Rec Hall and he sang the scores to me. We changed them very little from the way he had composed them on his drive back to camp on a day off.

Some time among the years: The Rec Hall became the Tryone Guppie Theatre and Skippers prize bass turned orange; The fireplace smoked up the theatre; Parents complained of boys in wigs and girls clothing; The lighting system nearly burned the theatre down; The dressing rooms became a photo lab; And the athletic program pushed everything else aside.

If Wally had only directed Camp Waupaca's drama, he would be remembered by the campers. One year he decided to be "Super Wally". That is he was determined to partake in all of the camp's activities. Wally never was one to do anything part way. That summer he took campers horse back riding, qualified as marksman on the rifle range, took a camping trip with campers, taught early morning fishing, learned to water ski around the lake, made a craft project, took campers on a nature hike, told campfire stories, and swam a laker (with a life jacket on). I am sure that there are camp alumni that have fond memories of that summer that were provided by Wally.

From the woods a bugle sounded at flag lowering. A strangely dressed camper would run into the center of the ceremony. Play a few notes on an instrument and announce, "Pied Piper Day". The campers would follow the "Pied Piper" to a specially prepared dinner. Although this was a fun activity for the campers it took Wally to make it memorable. His first "Pied Piper Day" event was an Hawaiian luau.

Charles Cooper and I sculpted a 20 foot statue with eyes that lit up red to communicate it's likes and dislikes. Old pier boards were covered with a canvas "topia cloth" designed and painted by Cooper. I roasted two hold lambs. The kitchen served up sweet potatoes, poi (bread pudding), pineapples, oranges and other fruit. The "Pied Piper" lead the camp up through the pine forest to the feast that was laid out in the field in front of the old red barn.

Two Hawaiian feasts were prepared for the "Pied Piper". A Roman party at the

rifle range followed and then it was over as far as I remember. The "Pied Piper" came no more to Camp Waupaca as other more important activities crowded him out.

A master of the farewell banquet, Wally drove the kitchen staff crazy. I remember a French Theme (the kitchen refused to make crepe crossets or croissants), an Italian theme with a black canoe gondola, and a wild west theme.

When the camp out counselor left, Wally took over the Early Bird program. This led to the Great Canadian Adventures. First the Early Birds. The first Early Bird headed by Wally was to Pestigo Lake (now a part of the Legend Lake chain). It was wilderness camping among the Menominee Indians. We hiked to "Spirit Rock", saw an Indian pageant of their history, fished, swam in the nude, canoed from Pestigo Lake through a narrow shallow stream, and caught a giant frog who became known as "Elmo". Manny and Lillian visited and freed three of Bob Moen's "homing pigeons". They stayed by the camp picking up scraps the boys threw out for them. When we packed up and headed back to Waupaca the birds were making their home in an oak tree at the campsite.

The next year the "Early Bird" was at a small lake in Menominee County called Bass Lake. It was full of fish and everyone caught at least one keeper. The campers had a great time, but there were only 20 boys who came on the trip. Wally had a great time making bisects, rolls, pot roast, pies, and other camp out foods. During the winter, he had studied out door cooking. The camp bought two iron pots called "Dutch Ovens" and two reflector ovens. Wally was able to make most anything you could find on a good restaurant menu. The boys on the trip were those who enjoyed the great-out-of-doors, but the winds of change were sweeping over the camp. This would be the last wilderness "Early Bird".

Eagle River meant a great get-a-away place for many of the campers. It started when Wally found out about some land on the flowage near St. Germain that is owned by Wisconsin Power and Light. There was a campsite, free for the using, on a high sand bluff overlooking the Wisconsin River. The river and lake meets at this bluff so that cool summer breezes kept most insects at bay. It is an ideal campsite with a sandy beach and level well drained soil. The Boy Scouts who use the site had built a latrine that is not too hard to use. The tourist town of Eagle River is near by with attractions that cause money to flow.

To this pristine setting Wally lead campers to find the mighty muskellunge and visit the sights and sounds of civilization in Eagle River. The trip consisted of: day one packing and travel, day two fishing and out door cooking, day three canoeing and out door cooking, fishing, day three a trip to Eagle River for the ice cream parlor and a movie, day four pack and return home. I am not sure why we enjoyed this trip so much. No one ever caught a musky, or a walleye, or even a pan fish. Dean Becker did save a tree that had fallen. Coleman nearly cut off

his toe with a sharp hatchet. One camper was nearly buried alive. All but one canoe floated away and had to be retrieved from far out into the lake. It was a great place to spend a few summer days.

Denied a wilderness "Early Bird" trip, Wally planned the "Great Canadian Canoe Trip". The excitement for the trip began when Wally and I began to write to outfitters. We met to look over the literature that was collected. After much discussion Bob Cary's Canadian Outfitters was selected. As neither Wally nor I had ever been on an extended canoe trip, we called on Chuck Cooper to help us organize. By the time camp started the plans were laid and the recruitment of campers began. We met with interested campers to get them set with the right kind of clothes. Boots for the portages were the most important item on the list. Rain gear and fishing equipment followed. Conditioning was started for each boy who was to travel with us. Each was to hone his canoe skills during free time. Wally and I were doing as much canoe work on the Crystal and Waupaca Rivers as possible. Also the river trips gave us the opportunity to work on making the dehydrated foods more palatable.

The try-out trip was from Waupaca to Weyawega on the Crystal River. Wally and I wanted to see just how our campers would work out so we pushed them as hard as we could down the river. At one point we canoed against the current to see how strong our wilderness team was. After the trip it looked good for the boys who came from Stratton Lake. Packing and traveling was another adventure. Its a long long way from Waupaca, Wisconsin to Ely, Minnesota.

Bob Cary had group cabins waiting for us. We felt right at home in the bunk beds and walls with open studs and the bathroom down a path. The Outfitter's staff and our guide packed the Duluth packs that evening. We hit the bunks for a good rest excited about the adventure we were about to embark on. The next morning rain was pouring from the sky.

Our guide got us started out after a great breakfast. We were to make a campsite about two miles into Canada that day. It took us quite some time to make it through the first lake. By the second lake our guide became restless by our slow progress. He suggested that he use his motor and tow one of the counselors to the Canadian Customs office so that when the rest of us got there time could be saved. Cooper and his partner were the lucky ones selected to go on ahead. Battling wind and rain the rest of us made the customs office by noon.

The next obstacle was a dam that we had to portage around. It was the main trail for anyone headed into the wilderness from the Moose Lake area. There were a lot of people ahead of us and the trail was slick with mud. About a mile from this we pulled into a camp site; wet, tired and hungry. Our guide went into the forest and came back with a lot of cedar logs. Soon he had built a shelter

tarp and had a hot fire going. The steak dinner that night was washed down with hot coca. It was hoped that the sun would be with us the next morning.

The next day was much the same as the first with rain pelting down most of the time. Whenever the rain stopped some of the boys went out fishing with no luck. After two days of rain, the sky cleared on the second night at the camp. Our guide left us the next morning and we were on our own. Most of the morning was spent drying out. About noon a fishing expedition was ordered. Cooper had been looking forward to the great fishing we would have all summer and fashioned a lure from a 'church key' (bottle opener). About the third cast he had a fish on the line, then his reel snarled and the line broke. That afternoon Cooper sold his fishing gear for a fraction of its cost. Several of us had fish on but no one caught anything that would fill the fry pan.

The final day at the camp site we had good weather and ventured out several miles. We stopped at islands and stood with one foot in the USA and the other in Canada. We found where a mishap had occurred and picked up a camp ax from the sunken treasure. The highlight of the day was when Ringel caught a lunker northern pike. This prize was prepared and put on ice for the trip back.

The last day was near disaster as the canoe teams were not chosen well. Three canoes had persons who did not have the greatest of skills. These canoes were soon left far behind by their faster moving friends. The groups did not get together again until late in the afternoon for supper. The expedition landed at Bob Cary's dock at about 8:00 PM.

The next year Wally came to camp with a 4 horse power folding Evenrude motor. With the motor we took our Canadian trip with the ease of floating down stream with the current. The first day we motored past the first year's campsite at about 10:00 AM and on to a portage. We made our way from lake to lake with out cursing the weight of the motor on portages. There were very few people and we explored water falls, berry patches, an old trappers cabin, beaver dams, likely fishing sites and swam nude. Many fish were caught and some were released because we had more than we could eat. I was lucky to catch a 36 inch lake trout in the Angus River.

One night we had a hard rain storm tucked tightly in our tents we kept dry with the heat from a small candle. Safe and sound we rested while back at camp Manny was beside himself with worry. That same storm had capsized the canoes of another group in the area and several lives had been lost. The TV news played up the storm as if it were a major natural disaster. When we called from Ely after our return several Manny could at last get some rest. That was the last of the Canadian Adventures for the camp. Wally made several trips back to the area. Renee' and I also made three trips there. I hope that some of the campers also got the bug and have been back to this great area.

The last year he was at Camp Waupaca was a great disappointment for Wally. The "Early Bird" had become the Wisconsin Dells tourist trip. The camp play was a small cast of boys singing songs from "Fiddler on the Roof", there would not be a Canadian trip, and competition was the most important aspect of the camp. "If all these boys want to do is play sports," Wally said, why don't their parents save their money and enroll them in Little League?'

Camp was always quiet and ghostly after the campers left for the summer. All of the activity, the noise, the life of the camp stopped but the electrical energy seemed to live on with no receptacle to use it. As usual I was packing, helping put the last bits of equipment away when Wally asked me to come with him to talk with Manny. Manny was by cabins 7-8 when we found him. Wally asked if he planned to have a full drama program the following year and if the Canadian trips would be permitted. Manny said that he could not afford the budget that Wally wanted for a full length play. He also said that the Canadian trip was too far from camp and too expensive for the parents. He asked Wally if he would head the tripping program and have just a couple small camp plays with NO Canadian trip. Wally said, "No. This then is my good-bye to Camp Waupaca. Without the programs that I have developed and worked so hard for I cannot return to this camp. I will never work at Camp Waupaca again." He turned and left. Shortly there after, Wally's car was headed out of camp.