

GREENWOOD MUSIC CAMP - 1941

An Excerpt from the *Autobiography of a Yankee-Nevadan*

In July of 1941, [my sister] Dorothy arranged for me to attend a summer music camp. On hearing of the plan I was both nervous and anxious about the prospect of leaving family and friends.

The Greenwood Music Camp was (is) located in the township of Cummington, Massachusetts, which in turn is in the Berkshire Hills, a stretch of the Appalachian mountain chain that enters New England from the southwest and continues northeasterly through Vermont (the Green Mountains), New Hampshire (the White Mountains) to Maine. The most prominent nearby feature is Mt. Greylock, at some 3,500' above the sea, the highest point in Massachusetts.

The Berkshire Hills were always famous for their summer greens and autumn pastel colors. They were verdant when I went to camp. Trees, grass, ferns, even the streams were green, the latter made so by clayey soils. And I was to learn that at least one reason for the Berkshires' beauty was rain, which fell in abundance during my stay at camp.

Greenwood Music Camp was initiated in Vermont in the early thirties, by Ruth McGregor and Dorothy (Bunny) Little. In 1940 the camp was moved to its permanent site in Cummington, where it was run by Ruth, Bunny and Dwight Little.

I remember best the Littles. They were then fairly young, very innovative, energetic and outgoing. Everyone liked and admired them. Though they were both versatile musicians, Bunny usually played the violin and Dwight played the viola.

The founders' objective was to provide an inspirational environment for the study of music. But not exclusively. Our daily schedule would include time for music, alone and with groups; time for work, digging, mowing, landscaping et cetera; and time for recreation, tennis, ball, kick-the-can and so on. I would never be overworked, overplayed, idle or bored at Greenwood.

We students ranged in age between twelve and fifteen. Our counselors, who helped the administrators and watched over us, were a little older. All of us musicians and would-be musicians had some experience. Most of us played a stringed or woodwind instrument. I think there was a French horn or two in our midst, but I don't recall anyone's playing a trumpet or a trombone. Our number was about equally divided between boys and girls, an arrangement that I found appealing.

The site of Greenwood Music Camp was formerly a farm. The main building, the old farmhouse, stood on a rise surrounded by handsome shade trees. The staff lived there, at least in the summer, and it was there that we dined, in a spacious dining room, and met in the parlor or music room at eventide for ensembles.

From the big house a rolling terraced lawn fell away to an orchard on the right, to a tennis court in the center, to cabins and a bunkhouse on the left. To the right a long low barn served as an auditorium for ensemble or orchestra rehearsals and concerts. The girls' cabins stood close to the main house and were "out of bounds" to us boys in the bunkhouse. A garage and sheds filled out the complement of buildings, while woods and pastureland made up the rest of the property.

The tennis court was new. In fact it was one of our work projects, which amounted to the laying, grading and rolling of a clay surface. Another project was the renovation of a water-well. That project was of great interest to me so I will elaborate.

The well was located on a steep side-hill in the trees a short distance from our bunkhouse. It was enclosed by a roof and, when we were not working in it, walls of moss-covered boards to keep the animals out. I say "in it" because we literally worked in the well, digging and removing clay. The greenish stuff - which might have been good for making pots - was sticky, saturated with water and heavy. A good foothold was non-existent and we slipped and slid and frequently fell into the mud or water. Still, under Mr. Little's able direction and despite a lot of joking and chatter on our part, the job progressed quite rapidly.

Using buckets, one of the crew - whose members varied from day to day but consisted of both boys and girls - would bail out water while the others dug and hauled out clay. Hard work? Yes. But it was the kind of work that, unlike a session in a gym, built strong muscles and taught cooperation and resulted in a useful product. I would wonder, at the end of the season, what comparable project the Littles might devise for future camp students. It was sad to think that they might be deprived of an opportunity to work in the mud, for I really enjoyed that part of the curriculum.

Soon after arriving at camp we subconsciously chose-up "best friends." All of my new acquaintances, perhaps twenty-five or thirty of them, were good sports; a majority were residents of Massachusetts, many were students at the Deerfield Academy, a private school in the Pioneer Valley.

Gerald (Gerry) Mayer, a clarinetist, hailed from Greenwich, Connecticut. He and I became good buddies right away. We seemed

to share common interests and notions of humor, and were usually on the same side, or team, when playing "steal-the-flag" and other games.

Another clarinetist, Ruth Bosson of Belmont, Massachusetts, was one of my girl friends. She was a sensible yet fun loving girl, and were I not so enamored of Shirley at that time I might have sought her affections. (Quite likely she already had a boyfriend.)

Just outside of nearby Lenox was a place called Tanglewood. It had been recently built to accommodate music festivals, and was the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The stage was set in a triangular "music shed," really an acoustical horn, the front of which was open to a natural amphitheater. Auditorium seats were lined up close in, the rest was open sloping lawn where crowds of music lovers could gather, and did, to enjoy concerts in a picnic-like environment.

The Littles had a Ford Beechwagon (sometimes called a station-wagon because of its use in meeting trains). Its doors and panels were made of real beech wood, hence the name Beechwagon. Sometimes we'd all pile into that Beechwagon and several big cars and travel to Tanglewood. One weekday we went to see the famous orchestra in rehearsal. Our seats were in close proximity to the orchestra, right down front where we could see and hear everything that was going on.

The conductor was Serge Koussevitzky; "Koussie," as his close friends referred to him. He was not a large man but he certainly fit my image of the ultimate conductor; supple in body and arms, long hair sticking out as if electrically charged.

It was a real treat to watch Koussevitzky in rehearsal. He worked with rolled-up shirtsleeves and no tie but was still the formal master. I shall never forget one of his actions that day. Frustrated with the way things were going he rapped the lectern with his baton, pointed his left hand at the first violin section and pleaded, "Play de nuts! Play de nuts!"

Gerry and I could hardly keep from laughing out loud. But the violinists proceeded to "play the notes," presumably to Serge's satisfaction this time.

Koussevitzky was said to be a taskmaster, demanding perfection of every individual member of the orchestra. And every member was, in my estimation, a virtuoso in his own field. I guess you could say that he was both a musicians' conductor and a conductor's conductor, for in addition to directing the orchestra he taught the art to others. Mr. Leslie, now Dr. Leslie, was among his protégés.

On Sunday, August 3rd, the Littles took us to a real concert at Tanglewood. Lounging or sitting on a blanket in the

shade of a tree, like the rest of the crowd, we drank soft drinks, teased one another and tried to concentrate on the far-away symphony.

The weather was ideal and I enjoyed the music - particularly Gregor Piatigorsky's solo rendition of Hindemith's "Concerto for Violincello and Orchestra" - but not to the same degree that I had at rehearsal a few days before. We were too far from the stage.

For a change of pace, and to introduce us to the realities of outdoor life, the staff organized an overnight camp trip. We each packed a tin cup, tin spoon, tin fork, toothbrush and toothpaste in a bag, rolled it inside a blanket and wrapped the whole in a square of canvas. (The canvas would prove to be a Godsend.) Our counselors hauled food in their packs, for we weren't expected to live off the land.

Away we went, briskly hiking down an old cow trail through the fields and woods to a "wilderness" somewhere, I knew not where, far from our bunkhouses. Sometime in the late afternoon we arrived at a small, grassy opening alongside a clear-water brook, and there the march was terminated.

The air was hot and muggy during the hike, but it was pleasant enough that evening, though cloudy, when we staked out individual camp-spaces and gathered wood for a campfire. The fire was kindled and old logs brought up to sit on. We opened bean cans and put them next to the coals to heat. We cut and sharpened willow sticks, on which to roast hotdogs and toast buns, and drew a supply of drinking water from a nearby spring.

When everything was ready we gathered around the fire to eat, and to swat at pesky mosquitoes that hovered over and lit on every exposed patch of skin in sight. When we were through eating, at dusk, a counselor started a ghost story and we took turns adding to the plot, each trying to outdo the last with embellishment and frightful rhetoric.

Ultimately, we turned to singing familiar tunes such as "Old Black Joe" and "Way Down Upon the Suwannee River." Some of us played our HOHNER MARINE BAND harmonicas. It was my first camp-out in the wild, and already I was enthused by the activities and camaraderie of the event.

The fire died down to a glow and we turned to our beds, tired and anxious for a good night's sleep. But sleep was not to come easily to me. I quickly learned that a layer of fresh-cut hemlock boughs, while fragrant, was a damned poor substitute for a stuffed mattress. Whether lying on my back or my side or my stomach, I was uncomfortable. And the night, though devoid of manmade sounds, was filled with a cacophony of wild noises. A whip-poor-will called, I supposed to its mate. A night hawk

"boomed" overhead. Rustlings in the bushes triggered my imagination. I conjured up all kinds of beasts to go with them. (Mice would have been more appropriate.)

After a seemingly long time exhaustion took over and I slumbered, only to awaken with a start when all went suddenly silent, eerily silent. It was as if I'd been transported to a planet in outer space where, I'd heard, there is no sound because there is no atmosphere. I rose up on one elbow and looked around, but could see nothing beyond the dim glow of an almost dead campfire. At least that was reassuring.

I lay back on my hard bed and shivered, more from anxiety than cold. I fought the emotion, knowing full well it was cowardly and foolish, but I couldn't help myself. At length I realized why the quiet. It was the calm before the storm. I felt a drop of moisture on my cheek and it wasn't sweat, it was rainwater. Of course, I remembered, much relieved, animals and birds always shut-up just before it rains.

The rest of my night was spent in two major occupations: Turning over and over in an attempt to keep my extremities from going numb, manipulating the canvas in an effort to keep my bed dry. It turned out to be a pretty sleepless night.

So this is what camping is all about? I asked myself. Sufficient to alleviate my own discomfort, however, was the knowledge that my peers were experiencing the same kinds of trouble; giving credence to the old adage, "misery loves company."

It has always been and always will be a fact that a bad night must eventually end. And that one ended, at least as far as I was concerned, when first I could make out the treetops above our tiny clearing. The darkness ended but not the rainfall, for it was one of those drizzling rains that could last for days.

With little reluctance I emerged from my cocoon - thankful that I had not undressed the night before - went to the brook, washed my face and hands in the cold water, dried them as best I could on my damp shirttail, brushed my teeth and retired to a relatively dry spot under a tree. There I sat, holding my canvas over my head, until the others, grumbling as I had, were all up and about.

I have no recollection of our eating anything that morning, only of moving around zombie-like in the drizzle, of securing our wet bedrolls and waiting for the order to march. Silently then, in single file, we slogged back up the cow path to the welcome comfort of our warm, dry, mansion-like bunkhouses.

Thus ended my first overnight experience in the woods. And not really by accident, it was my last such outing in New England.

Except for a raccoon, several skunks, chipmunks and squirrels, I saw no "wild" animals at Greenwood. But I did see the destruction perpetrated by a (presumably) hungry hedgehog. Mr. Little was in the process of outfitting a work group, to mow the tall grass in the orchard, and when we entered the barn (or shed) for scythes and rakes our leader, glancing up at the rafters, let loose a mild epithet. Following his gaze I observed the outline of an upside-down canoe on the two-by-four stringers, but I didn't immediately understand why he was so upset.

"Those dirty, blankety-blank porkypines have eaten my canoe," he voiced in a tone of disgust.

That canoe, he said, had been built by an Algonquin Indian some years before and was a prized possession. He had paddled it up and down a number of streams in Vermont and Western Massachusetts. Mr. Little went on to explain that it was constructed of birch bark over a spruce frame, and was made watertight by applying pitch to the seams.

All that remained of what must have been a beautiful vessel was its skeleton. A porcupine, or porcupines, had eaten every shred of its birch bark skin and left the frame intact.

For the moment the mowing job was postponed. Instead, we all fanned out and searched the woods for signs of the culprit(s). But of course none was found.

At Mr. Little's direction, we returned to the barn and nailed boards over every crack and opening we could see. It was a case of "closing the door after the horse was stolen." The damage was done.

I felt sorry for Mr. Little, for the canoe was irreplaceable. If I could have found the hedgehog that ravaged it, or any hedgehog, I'd have dispatched it with a vengeance.

We finally got to the haying project and that evening, at dusk, the boys challenged the girls to a game of steal-the-flag. It was a lively game, played on the fragrant, new-mown field in the orchard. Of course we captured the girls' flag and won.

And so ended my experience at summer camp in 1941.