

CHAPTER III

THE EARLY YEARS OF LUTHERAN CAMPING

By the year 1919, the stage had been set for formal Lutheran participation in the organized camping movement. Over the next several years the Lutheran Church moved forward on three fronts to reach young people through summer camping programs. Lutheran Inner Mission Societies, the United Lutheran Church in America's Committees for Work Among Boys, and the Augustana Luther Leagues all contributed significantly and in distinctly different ways to the birth of Lutheran summer camping programs.

The first documented summer camping program of the Lutheran Church in America originated in Pennsylvania with the Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh Inner Mission Society, like similar societies in other cities, was a Lutheran-related social service agency. The major concern of the Inner Mission Society was to provide spiritual and physical care for lonely, poor, and disadvantaged people living in the urban environment. Specific activities carried out by the Pittsburgh Society included the conducting of worship services for institutionalized persons, the visiting of persons confined to city hospitals, the supplying of food, clothing, and medical care to needy families, the organizing of a "Big Brother" program for juvenile offenders, and the counseling of college students.¹

¹Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Pittsburgh, Inner Mission Worker 5 (April 1919); 2.

The idea for a summer camp was first proposed in 1915 by the Reverend Ambrose Hering, Superintendent of the Pittsburgh Society.² No action was taken on the proposal, and the financial support needed for the establishment of a camp was not forthcoming. The idea later was thwarted by the United States involvement in World War I and the resulting high price and shortage of food, bedding, and camping equipment. In the Spring of 1919, with the War over, Hering made his fourth, and most persistent attempt to organize a summer camping program. This time the financial requirements were less demanding as camping equipment was being sold at government surplus prices. The April, 1919, issue of The Inner Mission Worker carried Hering's proposal to his constituency.

For four years I have carried with me the vision of a farm out in the country--where the birds sing, the flowers bloom and where the air is free and the water pure. A farm turned over entirely to these dwellers of the city slums, operated for their happiness and their health. A place to which weary mothers could go and do nothing but rest. A place where there are no 'keep off the grass' signs and where milk comes from a cow and not a can. A place where kids can play and throw without breaking a window and getting chased by a cop. . . .

. . . My vision has not grown dim and my hope has not gone a-flickering. Some day we are going to do this thing. The question is--should we continue to wait?³

A meeting was held on 1 April 1919 at Inner Mission headquarters to discuss the summer camp proposal. The result of that meeting was a decision to proceed with plans for a summer camp

²Ibid., p. 1.

³Ibid.

to begin on 5 July 1919.⁴ Arrangements were made with Sidney Passavant for free use of his property along the Connoquenessing Creek at Zelienople, twenty-eight miles north of Pittsburgh.⁵ The property was easily accessible from Pittsburgh by public streetcar; and it featured swimming, boating, fishing, and room for exploration and hiking. The objective of the summer camp was, "to provide one week of outdoor vacation life under Christian influences at lowest possible cost, to engage in wholesome recreation, and to train youths for effective leadership in Luther League and parish work."⁶ Based on that objective, a daily schedule of activities was prepared which included reveille, setting-up exercises, morning dip, breakfast, inspection, chapel, lectures, swim, dinner, rest, sports, supper, games, campfire, and taps. Overnight hikes and special events also were planned. Campers were housed in army duck tents with board floors. Food was prepared in a mess hall. Campers were instructed to bring toilet articles, towels, eating utensils, two heavy blankets, a sweater, a bathing outfit, sleeping garments, a notebook, a musical instrument, and a Bible. The cost for one week at camp was set at five dollars, with an additional one dollar charge for transportation, and a reservation was required in advance.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Pittsburgh, Inner Mission Worker 5 (July 1919): 1.

⁶Ibid.

Results of the first summer at Camp Wa-ba-ne-ki were reported to be mixed, with admitted weaknesses both in the program and in the management of the finances. Nevertheless, Hering concluded, "the good accomplished even this first season has amply repaid our efforts."⁷

By the summer of 1921, the summer camp at Zelienople was so popular that it was becoming a problem.⁸ "Undesirable overcrowding" resulted from weekly registrations of eighty-five persons and more. Visitors were coming to the camp without prior notification. Hering appealed to his constituency for courtesy in helping to relieve the "hotel situation". Additional squad tents, and other equipment were needed badly, and a request went out to all Lutheran Sunday Schools in Alleghany County, Pennsylvania, for financial assistance. The Inner Mission Society had invested \$1,200 to \$1,500 in camp equipment during the first three summers of operation. According to Hering, much of the success of the early years at Wa-ba-ne-ki was attributed to the Reverend Frank Richter who served as, "nurse, father, pastor, athletic director, chef, and chief entertainer."⁹

While the Pittsburgh camping program was the first to be operated by a Lutheran Inner Mission Society, others soon

⁷Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Pittsburgh, Inner Mission Worker 5 (September 1919): 1.

⁸Lutheran Inner Mission Society of Pittsburgh, Inner Mission Worker 7 (August 1921): 1.

⁹Ibid.