

My American Adventure

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I was barely able to comprehend the fun I would be having over the next two weeks. Many questions occupied my then sleepy thoughts, 'Had I forgotten anything? Would I like my host family? Would they like me?' I was off, with other members of 1st Bearsden Company, to visit Boys' and Girls' Brigade in the Fox Valley Wisconsin, to help them celebrate 100 years of Onaway as their island camp site. We would be joining with FDF Balle from Denmark and Brigade Wisconsin in a week long camp, but before that we had several days of home hospitality in Neenah, Wisconsin.

I dragged my travel-weary body out of the yellow school bus, which was our mode of land transport and identified my host family from the crowds of eager American parents, sons and daughters, awaiting our arrival. After rather hasty introductions I, along with my fellow house guest Iain, slept for fourteen glorious hours on falling into our beds for the week. I was nervous to meet the family. Although Mother seemed extremely nice I was conscious of not being a great conversationalist, but I found it very easy to converse with our wonderful host family as they were so welcoming and open. I'm sure every other boy felt instantly integrated into US society as I did.

Several optional group outings were organised while we were still staying with our families and the first was a visit to the 'Badger Sports Park,' an arcade-come-outdoor-amusement-park. This was a good opportunity for the boys to get to know their families. On 3rd July we watched the Light Parade through town as a precursor to the celebrations on 4th July. The following night, the Bearsden Pipe Band played for tens of thousands of people from a boat going round the Neenah Harbour just before the fireworks display. Playing was as much nerve-racking as it was an once-in-a-lifetime experience. The rest of the company attended various private parties with their host families.

The arrival at Camp Onaway was rather marvellous, I'll be honest. Sitting in those flat, stable pontoon boats, one is afforded a fabulous view of the lakes on which Onaway is situated. Underwater flora and fauna, the rippling, undulating lake, the serene islands. The atmosphere of intense excitement could be felt in the air as we stepped onto that island, a small pleasant rock of land consisting of a mess hall, recreational hall, several cabins which comprised the campers' accommodation and the leaders' HQ building. Those crystal clear waters would soon be the site of many a morning dip, more sensible people choosing the warmer options of morning exercises or morning reflections - the latter two of which the writer chose not to experience. There were plenty of other activities to keep the camper happy throughout the day, from banana boating (well, sharking, actually) to a game known affectionately as 'spoons.' Campers had barely enough time for teeth-brushing and finger-nail cleaning before cabin inspection. Before every such daily inspection boys were given 15-30mins to clean the cabins thoroughly. Points were lost for tiny cobwebs, grains of sand, miniscule paint chips. Points were awarded for the details in cleaning the bathhouse, cleaning the dishes after meals or tidying the rec' hall, etc.

I think the highlight for many, including myself, was the cross-country race. This was a Tribal race with many points at stake, wherein campers had to participate in a massive relay race of wading, canoeing, running, rowing, swimming and, above all cheering our way round the Lakes from and back to Onaway. It was great to experience that fabulous team spirit; working together to achieve something and having much enjoyment in the process.

Due to this fantastic team spirit, and the amazing people on the island, rather than the island itself, that made it so hard to say goodbye. This was also the case when leaving Wisconsin in general. The final three days of the trip were the longest of my life. But what an experience! We are looking forward to welcoming some of our American friends to Scotland in summer 2009 and deepening the friendships between our two groups. I hope they have as memorable a time as we all had.

Cpl Jamie Figes
1st Bearsden Company

