

CAMP CAPERS BEGINNINGS

Reflections on the Beginnings and Early Days of the Diocesan Camping Program

By

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I have been asked to reminisce about the early days of our camp program here in the Diocese, especially at Camp Capers.

Let me begin in a sort of chronological order with my return to the Diocese in 1938.

At that time, I came as rector of St. Mark's Church, San Antonio. Bishop Capers asked me to become chairman of the youth committee for the Diocese. I was very glad to do this because I had served for eight years in the diocese of Texas and had seen the great influences and strength of the camp program at Camp Allen under the leadership of Bishop Quinn. I felt strongly about the importance of a camp in the Diocese. Because of that feeling, I did what I could to get a camp plan for the summer of 1939.

After that, for several years, we used the property of Camp Arrowhead for a short period before their regular season began. It was a very attractive property and we were very indebted to Mrs. Gillis who had charge of that camp for letting us come during those years.

In the meantime, there was a growing feeling in the Diocese that we should have our own camp and that we should have not only a full summer program, but a year-long program. And, so a committee was appointed and began looking for the proper kind of property that might be available.

The search continued and finally about 1944, M. Albert Steves, Jr., who was on the committee and actively interested, found a beautiful area, seventy-five acres on the Guadalupe River with half a mile of river frontage, near Waring, Texas (between Waring and Comfort). This had been the summer home of the Negley family of San Antonio. Several of us went up and visited the area and were quite impressed. The old building was run down, but we could see the possibilities with the beautiful oak trees and river front and the comparatively isolated location. So, we began to move toward getting that property.

The first step was getting an option on the land to give us time to raise the money. There is a very dramatic story that is associated with the purchase and securing of that land.

This was the last year of World War II. Mr. Steves had several sons who were in the military service. One of them, Walter, was a pilot and during this period, when we were looking around for money to go ahead, it was reported that Walter was missing from his base in Italy. He had taken a flight and had not returned. For several days, the family and all of us, his friends, were praying earnestly that this young man would be found and rescued. Suddenly, after about two weeks, we had word that he was back at his base, safe and sound. In the joy of that occasion, Mr. Steves came to me and said, "The camp property is given by the Steves family as a thank offering for Walter's safe return."

In connection with this gift, I would like to say that the story of Walter's rescue is one of the most dramatic that I heard out of World War II. He had been shot down over Austria and his plane fell where the Nazis' were able to take it over very quickly, and he was put in a prison camp. During his days in the camp, he made contact with some of the other prisoners, and they worked out a way by which he could escape and get to a nearby airfield where there were several planes. He was intelligent enough to know how to fly them. In short, he escaped, got into a plane that belonged to the German Air Force and flew himself back to his base in Italy. This has always been a story I loved to remember and I'm also grateful to him and his family. I might say that both Mr. Steves Senior and Walter have since died.

So, we got busy, now, to make use of the property which really belonged to the Diocese. We set out to raise at least \$25,000 for the initial buildings that we would need. We found a hut that had been used in the war, a military hut, and got it through the salvage department of the Army. This became our first dining hall. It was later used as a craft center for the camp. We also had the question of a name for the camp. Bishop Capers, who had served for twenty-nine years as bishop, had died in 1943, and it was very appropriate, we all thought, for the camp to be named after him.

As we developed our plans, I asked the Rev. Fred Croft, who was then at Harlingen, Texas, to be in charge of our camp committee. A great deal of the early planning was done by him. St. Francis' Chapel, in particular, was his dream and he did a great deal of the work by hand on that building.

We were all set to have our first camp season in 1946. Just a few days before that exciting beginning was to take place, a serious polio epidemic developed, and we took counsel and decided this was not a good time to get a great many young people together. And so, the whole first season was called off.

The development of the physical property was continued and we were in good shape by 1947, which was our first camp season.

I might add here, that one of the great blessings that Camp Capers had from its earliest days of the Diocese, was when the camp-minded clergy were willing and able good leaders who took the time to be there. Gradually, we developed some very fine lay leaders as well.

From the beginning, the camp exercised a great healing influence, a uniting influence. It was a place where people began to feel their oneness in the family of the Diocese and not just as a member of a local parish. During all my twenty-five years as bishop, I saw this grow and develop myself. Young men deciding to go into the priesthood. I saw young men and women decide to marry; saw lay people deepening their commitment to Christ and the church. I feel that it has been and always will be an extremely important work of the Diocese.

I might add here that not only did we have those camp-minded clergy, but we have been most fortunate to have as my successors Bishop Gosnell and Bishop Bailey who believed strongly in the camp program and both of whom have made significant additions to the camp property during the years.

I have also been asked to comment a little further on why, out of my experience in the Diocese of Texas, I felt the great importance of the camp program in West Texas.

I made the statement when I was a parish priest that I felt our young people received more Christian education at a deep level in the ten days at camp than they did in the Sunday School all through the nine months. This is perhaps an extreme statement, but it indicates what can be done in an atmosphere with well chosen leaders, where the teaching process goes on twenty-four hours a day. I would also add that it is a mistake to think of the camp only in terms of young people. It is a place where older people meet. Take clergy conferences for example. They meet not in the context of an official business-to-be-done way, priests in distinction from bishops. They meet as fellow Christians. They become friends, and there is an atmosphere of informality, joviality, even hilarity as they meet in that setting. I have seen healing take place where there was misunderstanding between clergy or between bishops and clergy. There are so many sides to the camping program that are valuable.

I just think of one final point I would like to make to indicate my own strong interest in the camp program. From the very beginning, Mrs. Jones and I made it a point to go to the first camp of the season, which was usually the senior high young people. I usually acted as the chaplain for that camp. We lived in the old Steves Hall, which was the Negley house, and of course was named after Mr. Albert Steves, Junior. It was a little bit of a noisy place, a confusing time, but we were glad to be there, and we entered into the full life of camp as much as we could. We made friends with those young people which stood us in good stead through the years that followed and even up to this time. There were some great Friendships.