

FOURTH WEEK

Cabin Fevers

SOONER OR LATER during that staff summer, when there was free time and I thought I could brave it, I knew I would end up wandering over to my old high school cabin. When that time came, I left the main campus for the half-mile hike to the boys' divisions. The walk included crossing a two-lane highway and passing a foreboding state park that was more than a little David Lynch–spooky, followed by the university men's cabins, the campus classical-music radio station, and finally the All-State Boys' camp.

All-State was a two-week version of the camp experience, just for Michigan kids—which, in those days, connected Interlochen with the University of Michigan. It was a trial sampler, a kind of abbreviated Arts Lite. These kids were herded away from everything and everyone else, they dressed in non-corduroy uniforms (how *Raggedy Andy*, we

thought), and none of the full-summer campers took too kindly to them. The path that led from the main campus to the High School Boys division went right alongside the All-State cabins, and I recall that as campers we often did a dour football-cheer singsong, loud and clear enough for their benefit:

ALLEGRO MERCATO



The All-State program was important as camp's Michigan home-state connection, but we didn't see it that way. Years later, I learned that All-Staters had their own song about the full eight-week campers; unfortunately, I never found out the words, but I am sure they captured us snotty kids very well.

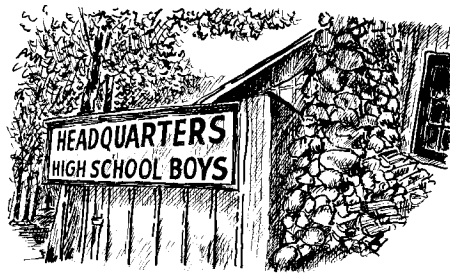
I arrived at the boys' division at last and walked inside my old cabin, HSB-11. It was dark and claustrophobic inside, and even more weathered than I expected. I looked up and saw the thin plywood plank with the names of all the boys in our cabin, which I had been maneuvered into scrawling neatly with a Magic Marker during our last few days together. Now the few boys who happened to be in the cabin when I poked my head in looked alarmed—as if a surprise mattress search was about to come down. I made my best attempt at a benevolent Dad-like smile in order to becalm them.

After I adjusted a little to the whole weirdness of visiting boys' camp, a wave of memories came to me. I had gotten my friend Barry to attend camp with me, and later on talked two more pals, Duncan and Jonathan, into coming along. The other three took to the experience very much as I did. We didn't hang on to each other too much; there were a lot of funny new people to make friends with. And three of us four ended up making our lives and careers in theatre, dance, or design.

My first summer as a camper included some tense moments. I loved classes and hanging out at the theatre, but cabin life was something quite different.

My counselor, Sheldon, was a nice Jewish boy—from Canada. High School Boys Cabin 11 housed sixteen boys, ranging from Iowa and Oklahoma farm boys to a couple of smart-asses from Scarsdale and upstate New York who complained bitterly about the lack of bagels, decent or otherwise.

The New York pair and I butted heads early on, even though I too was from the East Coast. We would have heated arguments over differences of opinion on music, theatre, and art. Boys that age usually argue over who is the best baseball player, or even world politics, but at camp disagreements boiled up over things like whether Bach was the only genius composer (“the rest were just



romantic garbage”) or if musical comedy could be considered *real theatre* at all.

Andy and Eddie were imperious about their artistic convictions, and our fighting matches usually escalated to the point of being vicious, personal, and quite nasty. I was confounded, miserable. No one could have warned me that I’d need debate-team skills at camp, or that I’d have to justify a love of Prokofiev and Kurt Weill just to avoid being an outcast. But I suppose I did learn a little about the way strong personality clashes can upset the apple cart.

Unlike at most camps, however, we didn’t spend the majority of our time with our cabin mates. We really saw each other only for mandatory sports a few afternoons a week and at bedtime; our closest friendships were formed from our all-day classes and rehearsals and from evening performances.

When we were all together, cabin life was a sort of a parody of Boy Scout camp. Even though everyone there was busting to be a musician, actor, artist, or dancer, the boys’ camp director insisted on interjecting all sorts of dumb rituals



into our days. The rituals were aimed at maintaining the program’s image of wholesome outdoor life, a holdover from the 1920s and ’30s, making sure camp was still camplike.

So we rose at 6:30 to a crisp, peppery, live reveille, and promptly appeared on the tennis courts in our PJs for a set of calisthenics and the day's announcements and admonishments. If my memory serves me, no one ever actually played tennis, so the courts seemed a masquerade for this other, truer function.

The breaking point, even for the marginally athletic boys, was Cabin Competition—known in camp lingo as Forced Fun. This consisted of several afternoons a week of competitive softball, soccer, volleyball, and the like. All these teenage *artiste*-boys had come to camp thinking they'd died and gone to heaven where there were no sports, and here they were once again in all their familiar terror.

The thing is, it was never a case of kids being shipped off to a camp arbitrarily selected by chilly parents; most of us had begged our parents to let us go to Interlochen so we could practice, compete, and exhaust ourselves in preparing for The Arts. Kids came home from their summer and spoke rhapsodically about it to their friends, who then often joined them the following summer. Camp probably just wanted us to write home to our folks that we were enjoying a "balanced summer." The one redemptive offering was sailing lessons, a noncompetitive, nearly solo, and pleasantly idyllic way to appreciate Lake Wahbeka, which bordered the boys' side of the campus.

A typical camper day ended with groups of boys taking the long, dark, shadowy walk back to our cabins after an evening's performances. There would be the final rallying sounds of us banging about, fighting over the four faucets

where we brushed our teeth with water tasting of iron, and then the turning-out of bare 40-watt bulbs, one by one. Our counselor would say something dumb like “Well, gents... I want you to take a final pee now and hit the sack... or I’m giving you a rubber band for the night.” And finally, after that long, exhausting, intense, and event-filled day, there was *Taps*, with the most beautiful legato trumpet playing one could possibly imagine.

One night our counselor, Sheldon, made the mistake of telling us that he would need to step out for a few hours just as we were settling down to hit the hay. He was on duty a few cabins away, doing his rotational at division headquarters. Shel would have been wiser to say nothing, wait for the first waves of snoring to start, and then slip away. Instead, he warned us that he’d keep checking in and that our cabin was within earshot of where he was to be on duty. Of course, it was an irresistible (if last-minute) dare to not be on our best behavior. Winning “Honor Cabin” wasn’t exactly on anyone’s mind.

I figured that as soon as Sheldon left there would be plenty of idiotic carryings-on, faked flatulence fests, and cracks about our counselor’s love life, and that it would mean only that I’d get less sleep. Maybe I should even count the seconds before it started, I thought.

In fact, nothing at all happened, at least for ten or fifteen minutes. Then I heard a high-pitched tune starting to be played, softly at first but clearly coming from within our cabin. At first it sounded like a kazoo, until I realized that it was someone playing a tune into just the mouthpiece of a trumpet. It was Jerome, a goofy but ordinarily shy cabin mate.

The tune Jerome was eking out was the Interlochen Theme, which everyone grasped immediately, laughing as he continued with his squawky solo rendition. The theme was such an ever-present mantra at camp that whether you loved it or hated it, you knew it by heart. A few more bars, and everyone began humming along. Some of the boys even hummed the B-section arching harmonics of the French horns, since they were horn players and knew that orchestra part.

We all hummed along louder and louder until the piece was complete, by which time our cabin was generating quite a bit of cartoonlike orchestral sound. The neighboring cabins apparently heard us quite distinctly, because they all laughed, whistled and hollered, and finally applauded. Then—completely true to camp tradition—the other cabins, led by our own, uttered the requisite “Shhhh...!” that always followed the playing of the theme at any real camp performance, in order to prevent the tourists from polluting its sanctity with their applause.

My cabin mates howled and snickered their approval a minute or two longer, and someone whispered, “Good one, Jerome!” Then half a dozen boys promptly began faking exaggerated snores just as the cabin screen door squeaked open and flapped shut, and our counselor rushed in to find a quiet, peaceful model cabin of sixteen boys in slumber.

ONE AFTERNOON, SHELDON came into the cabin and announced, “Okay, listen up, guys....I’ve got some really

good news.”

“Camp is discontinuing any form of sports and no longer putting saltpeter in our food?” snorted Eddie, a violist and one-half of the New York pair—the half with the most pronounced accent.

“Get serious, Eddie. No, I’ve arranged for us to have a cabin date with a high school girls’ cabin next week.”

The reaction was mixed—simultaneous whoops along with glum eye rolls and low groans. A cabin date? Can two drugstores date? What about post offices? It was a clumsy move to socialize a bunch of boys, most of whom either weren’t ready for dating or were on their poky little path to coming out. But there was no getting out of it; we had to keep our date with High School Girls Cabin 8, attendance required.

The date was somewhere between a total snooze and an utter disaster. The dining hall had packed up a cold picnic version of the same crummy food. We went to the edge of the boys’ lake at sunset and sat on jagged rocks. The girls assertively asked us boys questions that elicited only little grunts and nervous laughter in response. It became clear to us that the whole thing was an excuse for Shel to meet the blond female counselor of HSG-8 under charmed circumstances, where he might woo her by demonstrating his easy, natural rapport with a motley bunch of high school boy art nerds.

The few boys who had the time and the desire to date made use of two quaint camp traditions: “shake gate” and “date gate.” These were two gates at the outer edges of girls’

camp, which had both male and female counselor-referees on hand to monitor the high schoolers' heat. The "shake gate" was the ending place for a casual date that closed with a handshake instead of a kiss, and the "date gate" was the place for one that ended in a smooch, which of course had a strict time limit on it. I never found out if the two gates were adjacent or not.

MY SECOND SUMMER AS A CAMPER was much more fun; miraculously, I was no longer the center of derisive attacks, just an ordinary member of a reasonably harmonious cabin. I passed over theatre, majoring in radio instead. With minors in music composition (studying old rules of harmony—grueling, but my little piano trio got performed), piano tuning (hopelessly difficult, but the tools we got were very cool), and piano lessons (Debussy and Ravel that summer; my teacher from Texas insisted that my hands were nearly the size of Cliburn's—who with one hand could reach a fourteenth and glissando with it; I had hope).

Radio was a blast. Interlochen's FM public radio station manager, Richard Goerz, was articulate and non-nonsense, yet not without dry humor—and he let us take on everything that was happening at the station. The group of five boys and two girls took control of the recording booths, ripped yellow printouts of hot news and weather off the UPI teletype, and ran around campus with tape recorders doing interviews with faculty and visitors. We thought up the angles for our little spots, edited magnetic recording

tape on splicing blocks, and within days heard our short programs on the air over WIAA.

The two girls in the class were live wires, a breath of fresh air amid the mostly male group of students and station staff. And we all took a keen interest when the pair thought up an idea for a short recorded piece on an occasional camp occurrence, “slumber music.” Every couple of weeks during the summer, camper musicians would volunteer to perform short chamber music pieces—a string quartet or flute duet—within the high school camps at lights-out. These short, bonus lullaby recitals were yet another way for musicians to perform, and were something we all enjoyed, within the blur of so many treasured camp memories. Many years later I was amazed to discover from an old camp brochure that there had been slumber music as early as the 1940s.

For their radio piece the girls taped a few student players, mixed the music with light sounds of crickets and birds, and overdubbed short, pre-dreamtime comments from individual campers. The piece was brilliant and sincere; we played the tape over and over again, admiring



what they'd done. Even the dweeby station engineers were impressed. They stood there, arms folded, nodding their heads and adjusting their thick glasses in astonishment. I was envious that the team had come up with so charming and sound-

worthy an idea and managed to carry it off so well. Years later, I wished I had a copy of the tape to play again, to see if it held up across the years.

I thought that Goerz, our radio teacher, was cultured and elegant. Maybe it was because one day he had us do trial announcer readings of a weather report, and he told me I must have listened to a lot of good announcers because when I read, “And not *quite* so cool near the foothills...” I spoke with just the right amount of nuance and subtlety. We all had a crush on him.

At the end of my summer, as always, I found returning home from camp to be a bit of a letdown. Adults at Interlochen treated us like professionals in a way we never experienced at home. We’d been working at a certain level, and had gotten used to a community and an audience who seemed to get what we were doing. At Interlochen, at least, every kid was a player.