

Pine Nuts

Excerpt from Third Week,
“In the Corduroy Groove”

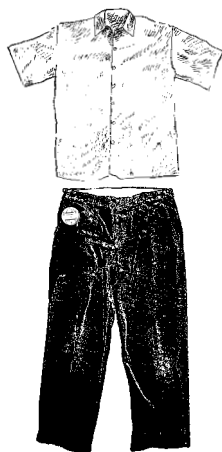
HOW COULD I GET THIS FAR and not say something about the lost-in-time uniforms? The best way to visualize them might be by looking at a still of a Jeanette MacDonald–Nelson Eddy movie set at a forest campground, just as the talkies were emerging.

Everyone wore light blue short-sleeve shirts. Boys and men were outfitted in dark blue corduroys. And the girls and staff women wore...dark blue corduroy knickers. Knickerbocker Kid ragtime-era knickers, not pedal pushers—old-fashioned boy-knickers, complete with five snaps at each hip. These were completed by color-coded knee socks that indicated Junior, Intermediate, high school, or university/staff status. Two sets of uniforms for each camp member.

The old wives’ tale/folk legend explanation for knickers was that they were more appropriate, modest practice clothes for girl cellists. Parents and tourists found the camp “costume” peculiar, and one can only imagine what campers

arriving from the United Kingdom thought when they read that girls were allowed to wear only knickers around camp as their standard uniform.

Camp preferred that, on Sundays, we wear white shirts brought from home, and if we needed wraps, they were supposed to be red sweaters. Very USA, very Joseph Maddy. Photos of campers used for brochures were therefore taken on Sundays, so we looked both patriotic and quaintly rustic (the knickers), like wax museum figures at an American Revolution musical theme park. Maddy, being a smart promoter, made certain to photograph campers, especially close-ups of small groups, on a regular basis.



I loved those old brochures from the 1960s and wish I had saved more of them—they'd managed to lure me to camp in the first place, after all. The brochure photos were always models of staged improbability: six dreamy-eyed female harpists sinking into the sand by Lake Wahbeganetta, or four male bassoonists lined up near a few pine trees, the group completed by the unlikely appearance of a female dancer, en pointe in a perky red tutu, balanced atop a craggy stone wall—everyone's eyes glazed over with the sound of *music, music, music!*

Many of the photos were leaden and ordinary, but the captions were classic:

Exposure to music "takes" at Interlochen.

A trio is formed with students from Austria, Japan,

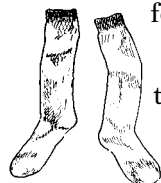
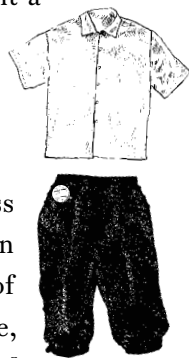
and Germany.

High School Orchestra performs forty-four symphonic works in fifty-seven days.

Junior boys excel in “he-man” sports.

Modern dance develops physical fitness.

By the '70s, camp owned more than ten thousand pairs of corduroys, and the inventory included very old ones mixed in with the new. The oldest trousers, while full-pleated and hot on summer days, were deep-pile, velvety-soft, wide-wale corduroy—the kind of fabric that has long since vanished from production. The shirts ranged from million-times-washed cotton to thin, filmy rayon-cotton, all with limp, flattened collars to complete the prescribed vintage arts-dork look. Some of the guys got smart and brought a set of nicely fitted modern equivalents from home. And that got noticed right away. It wasn't quite Camp Frowns, more like “Check *him* out!”



The uniforms were a source of endless discussion every summer and were an inextricable part of the identity and culture of Interlochen. I'd never worn a uniform before, and like everyone else, I came to be surprised at the freedom it imparted. Our natural tendency was to focus more on people's facial communication and personalities because we were all wearing the same absurd, almost whimsical, time-warp getup.

Years later, camp rearticulated its commitment to the uniforms; the list crackles with its own logic:

The most important aspect of wearing the uniform is neatness. From the beginning, the Interlochen uniform has meant:

A spirit of unity

A simplified day

A means of identification

A blurring of class distinctions

A simplified day— who could argue with that one?