

A Conversation with Thom Feild

Author of *Pine Nuts*
Recollections of Summers at Interlochen

You hadn't been to Interlochen for more than 30 years. Why did you feel the need to write *Pine Nuts* after all that time?

I had been telling myself for 20 or 30 years I would do this one day, it just seemed the moment had arrived. Interlochen is that indelible an experience. The hardest thing is that I'd always hear other alums say things like, "When I try to explain Interlochen to others, I can never quite convey what all the magic was." Friends who went to camp and the academy were very excited that I was going to try to write something — especially from the camper/staff viewpoint — and try to show it instead of talk about it.

How much of *Pine Nuts* is about real events?

Every bit of it is real. It was eerie, scary, and wonderful how many details came back to me when I visited camp in 2005. Of course, pouring over photos, programs, and memorabilia, triggered a wave of emotions and stories. And friends passed along tons of recollections and stories, more than I could ever use. That was when I realized that Interlochen seemed to exercise the same lasting power over others. How many things can we say that about in life, realistically?

Do you think music overshadows Interlochen's other offerings?

Well, it was certainly true in my day, in the 1960s and 70s — music made the camp's reputation originally. Not so now. In fact, I was amazed to hear that the Theatre Arts-musical theatre program is so popular that they turned away 200 kids last summer. Creative writing is also a huge draw. The newest area of study, Motion Picture Arts is a great addition that links drama with writing in a collaborative, cross-disciplinary way.

Joseph Maddy, the camp's co-founder, said that many kids who study at Interlochen don't go on to careers in the arts. Is that true?

That's probably still true. People's lives certainly are the richer for going to Interlochen, though. One of the more recent things that is happening is that Interlochen is tracking and recognizing alumni who are not only celebrated in the arts, but in other areas, too, such as arts administration, the media, as corporate leaders, and so on. For example, Larry Page, who co-founded Google, and Michael M. Kaiser, president of the Kennedy Center.

Why isn't Interlochen better known than it is, after 78 years of operation?

Ha! I ask myself this all the time. When I get a chance to tell a friend about Interlochen, within a minute or two they shake their head and say, "Whoa. Why hadn't heard about this before?" Often they are curious enough to go to the website, see the campus map, the amazing list of alumni, etc.

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You seem pretty obsessed with Interlochen. Is this typical of other alums?

I suppose the emotions are all over the map. For some, it's just a wonderful memory of youth. Others stay very involved as supporters of camp, become local Interlochen Ambassadors, volunteers, etc. You see a fair number of famous actors, musicians, and such bring up Interlochen in their interviews and autobiographies and help out by doing fund raiser appearances. It's a common belief that the Interlochen Arts Academy (IAA) grads are more fiercely loyal than camp alums, but I can't say I agree with that.

Over the years, I've kept up with four or five friends from camp, and in the process of working on this book I found more than a dozen more. It was quite amazing. Nine of us (most of the "main characters" in *Pine Nuts*) couldn't resist meeting up in again NYC last May — coming from as far as Texas, Arizona, and Washington state. It was surely one of the most heart-warming and hilarious nights of my life. One fellow brought an enormous shopping bag containing every printed program from a summer: operetta props, photos, even a chunk of scenery. Then I knew I wasn't the only one who was still pine-nuts after all these years!

What do you see or what would you like to see there in future?

I'm very excited about the Motion Picture Arts program. And there will be a new art building at long last. I've always hoped camp would find ways to embrace applied arts — graphic design, architecture, fashion, and so on. If you think about really creative companies like Pixar, Apple, and ILM — those are a true blend of art and design.

When I visited camp in 2005, I asked a young woman on the music staff if there were any offerings in world music studies. She said, "No. But they're going to have to think about that — the college music schools include it now."

Most of all, I hope Interlochen keeps its spirit, focus, and emphasis on discipline that lasts a lifetime. It's nice to see the place take advantage of its being "the bubble", as some call it. Time away from email, cell phones, television, traffic, and enjoying F2F time with bright, talented, high energy people, and of course, that perfect setting... Visitors picks up on all this right away. To have and keep that in 2006... What a feat, truly!

What has been camp's response to *Pine Nuts*?

Jury's out. Ask me later on that one!