

When the Cape was summer camp HQ

By Tim Weller

Once upon a time, in the not-so-distant past, Chatham and Orleans hosted thousands of girls and boys during the summer.

Most were “from over the bridge.” For up to eight weeks, they came to experience the excitement of “overnight camp,” or “away camp.”

From Quanset to Namequoit to Viking to Lake Farm, the area teemed with summer camps in the 1950s and 60s.

The Atwood House & Museum has collected dozens of camp artifacts from those glory days – signs, photographs, t-shirts, ditty bags, you name it. For (old) campers seeking to recall those special years, please contact the Atwood’s archive department at archives.atwood@gmail.com and schedule an appointment. The department is open Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

Camp Tonset

I was one of those campers. From age 11 to 16, Camp Tonset in East Orleans was my summer home. What an impact those years had!

So many firsts: As a kid born and raised in Michigan, I experienced the inconsolable ache of homesickness. I learned how to get along with other boys you had never met -- and in many cases were not like you. Later, I learned how to teach leadership skills to younger campers. I also learned how to finesse my way through my first hangover (blame Colt .45 malt liquor). On rare off days, I learned to hitchhike to Chatham to visit a first girlfriend.

Roderick and Mary Hagenbuckle started Camp Tonset in 1949. “Mr. H” was a school teacher with extensive camp experience. He had previously worked with “Gunny” Eldredge at Camp Malabar in Chatham, and later with a brother at Camp Viking in South Orleans.

Tonset – a Native American term for that area of East Orleans – lay on Nauset Harbor with beach front adjacent to Snow Shore. The property included a pine tree-studded hill which housed cabins, a mess hall, a recreation hall, and the infirmary. The camp never had more than about 85 campers, which allowed the staff to bond with the boys, according to an Orleans Historical Society report.

Sailing and swimming were key activities, followed by baseball, tennis, track, archery, riflery and wood shop.

The Camp was split into two teams, “Port” and “Starboard.” The teams would compete in sailing races, swim and track meets, even corn-shucking contests.

But by the early 1970s, the times were changing, and the camps fell out of favor.

You know the story: The Cape was “discovered.” Real estate values soared. Camp owners died or retired. Developers came knocking.

The camps faded away, with Tonset closing in 1972.

Still, I recall those days fondly – and why one of my favorite colors remains “Tonset green,” the color of the camp’s uniforms.

The Atwood House & Museum is located at 347 Stage Harbor Road. The museum’s phone number is (508) 945-2493 and its website is www.chathamhistoricalsociety.org. Tim Weller is a member of the Chatham Historical Society/Atwood House & Museum Board of Trustees.