

Happy Monday

Memories Of Camp Wauwepex



Bill Neubauer

Do you know how not to be a mud turtle?
Until 1930 I had never investigated this art.
Nor, to be honest, had I heard of it.

But that summer I went for three weeks to a Boy Scout camp at Wading River, Long Island, and the art sort of trapped me there in the woods.

Camp Wauwepex was under what seemed to be the thousand-eyed supervision of "Mr. Covey, Sir," a hugely fat man addicted to wearing skimpy Boy Scout shorts.

The inspection tours of Mr. Covey, Sir, through the camp's various divisions and tent units were attended inevitably by bugeyed stares of disbelief and giggles, for the big rump and bigger belly heaved and rolled erratically with every step.

The tread of Mr. Covey, Sir, was light as a feather in the woods areas, however, for he believed strongly Man should not mar or disturb in any way the natural beauty that is our heritage.

So Mr. Covey, Sir, caught me writing a poem to a surgical nurse I was currently in love with at St. Giles Hospital, and he was aghast.

He detailed to me the beauty of the woods spread out on all sides, the agreeable lie of Deer Pond between gently rolling hills, the play of swallows nearby, the shy beauty of the butterflies and some feeding bees.

Then came the blow, delivered in a voice so thunderous I am sure that some of the deer he startled have not stopped running yet.

"You are a mud turtle," Mr. Covey, Sir, declared.

And he went on to explain that a mud turtle lives way down there in the mud of Deer Pond and never sees anything and never does anything meritorious, that all a mud turtle does is wallow around down there and moon and mope.

Mr. Covey, Sir, would not accept that writing a love poem to a surgical nurse named Mrs. Nan Rust was other than mooning and moping around like a mud turtle when there was a world to enjoy, things to do, accomplishments "of high degree" to attain.

Well.

Among some accomplishments I should attain to, he suggested, were running a mile in less than an hour, learning to swim so that I could pass my Second Class tests, and putting all my books away until I had returned to the hospital for a scheduled surgery.

What I would rather do, I told him finally, was to be the bugler for Division II, which was chiefly by an Eagle Scout we all called Sourdough.

Mr. Covey, Sir, demanded to know how a mud turtle could be a bugler. A certain Tenderfoot scout would have to prove he was not a mud turtle before such a high honor could be accorded to him.

So all the books were put away. Every day I would line up at a starting point and Mr. Covey, Sir, would blow a whistle and I would dart off with a mighty swing of my crutches to try for a 58-minute mile.

Every day I would go down to Deer Pond for swimming lessons from another Eagle Scout who could really swim across the half-mile lake a dozen times without much of a rest.

What Ray taught me to do was float and to make progress of a sort by gentle movements of my hands. Mr. Covey, Sir, questioned in booming tones that this sort of thing could be called swimming, but he had to concede I didn't sink, so that was Accomplishment I.

The mud turtle in me then soared all the way out of the depths of mooning and moping to the clear sunlight and beauty of Accomplishment II.

The camp doctor, you see, a highly skilled orthopedic surgeon, taught me a better way to use crutches, a technique involving "walking" on hands and wrists, rather than swinging heavily along with all weight resting on the tops of the crutches.

One mile was clocked at 40 minutes. Another came in at 39. Mr. Covey, Sir, knew deep in his heart that a true Boy Scout is always honest and trustworthy, just as the Scout Laws say, but he "ran" the next mile with me just to satisfy, shall we say, a scientific curiosity.

Half the camp trailed along to see the sight.

So a morning came when I could stand on the balcony of the chow hall of Division II to summon its 400 scouts to breakfast. It was a cold morning, and I was scared the bugle notes would crack and splinter horribly, but they didn't. "First Call" was crisp, got results.

Then with 400 boys standing in full uniform at the bottom of the hill, the American Flag waving and the patrol flags forming a magnificent color guard, I blew "Second Call."

At once, from below, came answering drum rolls and bugle blasts.

Then up the hill came one of the most beautiful sights of my boyhood: 400 fellows marching in perfect step to make an "eyes, right!" at Mr. Covey, Sir, and yell at him: "Mud Turtle!"

But he had accomplished, too, by teaching one of his Tenderfoot scouts to accomplish, by showing him that the art of not being a mud turtle is simply the art of rising from the mud of inertia to do things.

So he gave me a little wink and stood there at full salute until the last of the scouts had finished razzing him because I had defeated him in a 38-minute mile race.

Happy Monday.