

Summer Camps

Camp Inuspi

When representatives of the long-established Lethbridge Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) sought permission from Waterton park managers to operate a camp in 1934,¹ they were being optimistic at a very pessimistic economic time—The Great Depression. Little did they know that their modest camp would become the largest in the park and one that, generations later, campers and counsellors alike would remember fondly.

Superintendent Herbert Knight and a committee of five YMCA supporters met in the park in April, 1934 to look for a potential location for a youth camp.² Following the visit, Knight wrote to his Ottawa boss advising, "It is the intention of the YMCA to erect a permanent camp on the site, if this meets with your approval."³

A month before, the committee had done its homework by contacting Senator William A. Buchanan asking him to test the waters with J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National



Camp Inuspi's first lodge was a gathering place and dining hall for all campers and their counsellors.

(Photo: Galt Museum and Archives)

Parks. Harkin was most encouraging: "I am pleased to advise you that the policy of the department is to encourage YMCA and other such camps in national parks. The experiences with such camps in other parks have clearly demonstrated that these camps provide a means for a holiday in the parks for many boys and young men who would otherwise be unable to enjoy the benefits of such an outing."⁴

Just 10 weeks after the committee's visit, a canvas camp was set up on the east side of Lower Waterton Lake where the YMCA was given a license of occupation for 18 acres of land.⁵ That summer 26 older boys spent three weeks at the camp and 36 younger campers arrived for a 10 day stay.⁶

The first group was able to participate in formal dedication of the camp on July 1, 1934, which included the announcement that thenceforth the camp would be called Camp Inuspi,⁷ from the name used by the Blackfoot Indians for the late John George "Kootenai" Brown, first forest ranger in charge of the park, which translated to "Long Hair" for Brown's hairstyle.⁸ Fittingly, the camp was located across the Lower Lake from Brown's gravesite where he was buried in 1916.

Each summer through 1968, campers were busy from morning to night with activities under the supervision of camp leaders and leaders-in-training. One of the first such leaders was 23-year-old George Swedish⁹ who helped clear brush at the camp site and set up the tents before taking charge of one group of boys during the initial camping session. Swedish recalled years later that “....our first camp was in tents and it rained and rained and it rained,” noting that the camp was very primitive with bedding set out on pallets inside the tents. “The cooking was done in a tent, the eating was done in a tent,” he said.

The year 1935 marked the start of several changes and improvements that would continue over the life of the camp. Girls were invited to attend in separate camp sessions that summer.¹⁰ As luck would have it, the camp closed for the season just one day before the start of the Boundary Creek fire which filled the Waterton Valley with black smoke and created much local concern.¹¹ And that year, the first building—a log structure to house the kitchen, was erected. It was just the first step that would see years of camp improvements thanks in large measure to the generous contributions of the Kinsmen Club, the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Club, Gyro Club, *Lethbridge Herald* and others. By 1936 all campers were housed in nine person cabins, eight of whom were youths and one counsellor.

Not even the advent of the Second World War slowed down camp attendance thanks to the financial support of both groups and individuals.¹² In developing the camp from absolutely nothing to a well equipped state, the financial problems had been many and varied. Among the many staunch, generous and loyal backers of



A second, larger camp lodge was built after a fire destroyed the original building. It was situated above and to the east of the first lodge and offered a spectacular view. (Photo: Chris Morrison)

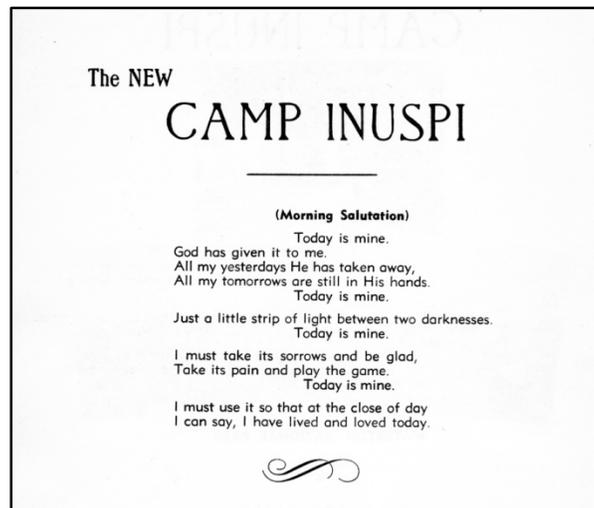


Just below the camp was Lower Waterton Lake where the participants went swimming, a refreshing activity after a long day of hiking on a hot day. (Photo: Chris Morrison)

the local Y camp, the name Russell H. Bennett of Minneapolis and Twin Butte headed the list.¹³ Learning that the camp would find it difficult to operate under wartime conditions, Bennett donated \$450 which provided an outing for many needy girls and boys as well as clearing up an accumulated building deficit.¹⁴

In July, 1949 disaster struck the camp when an early morning fire, fanned by strong winds, destroyed the dining lodge, kitchen and ice house. The loss was only partially covered by insurance.¹⁵ Citizens of Lethbridge rallied to remedy the disaster with donations and labor in kind to rebuild.¹⁶

Camp Inuspi met its eventual end after the 1968 season as its license of occupation was about to expire. It had grown substantially since the tent days. Besides the replacement main dining lodge, the camp consisted of 11 cabins for children, a small lodge for arts and crafts, three cabins for the staff and hospital hut plus a facility for indoor toilets and a bathing house.¹⁷ These improvements were sold to the government in 1971¹⁸ for \$18,000¹⁹ in light of a new park master plan which called for the cessation of privately-owned camps.²⁰





¹ The Lethbridge YMCA was established in 1910 and operated from an impressive three story building located in the city's downtown at 4th Avenue and 10 Street South.

² Chris Morrison, *Waterton Chronicles: People and Their National Park*, (Lethbridge: Goathaunt Publishing, 2008), 118.

³ Library and Archives Canada, RG 84, A-2-a, vol. 2171, file W16-22, pt. 1. Letter to J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, Ottawa, from Herbert Knight, superintendent, Waterton Lakes National Park, April 20, 1934.

⁴ Library and Archives Canada, RG 84, A-2-a, vol. 2171, file W16-22, pt. 1. Letter to Senator William A. Buchanan, Ottawa, from J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, Ottawa, March 5, 1934.

⁵ The size of the camp's land was reduced in 1951 to 10.38 acres when a resurvey was done to site a new dining lodge.

⁶ "Days All Too Short for Happy City Boys at 'Y' Camp," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 9, 1934, 3. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

⁷ Inuspi is pronounced "InÓspi".

⁸ "Dedicate Y.M.C.A. Camp," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 3, 1934, 7. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

⁹ George Swedish later went to work for the park as an accountant for four years ending in 1940. Interview of George Swedish, no date, WLNP Archives, Box 117, no item number.

¹⁰ "Girls Y Camp at Waterton Opens Season," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 30, 1935, 9. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

¹¹ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 12, 1935, 12. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

¹² It is not clear how the camp was able to get around rationing during the war which included food, tires and gasoline.

¹³ Russell Bennett was owner of the Shoderee Ranch, north of the park.

¹⁴ "Generous Gift to Y Camp at Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, Jan. 8, 1942, 7. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

¹⁵ "Fire Hits Camp Inuspi," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 16, 1949, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

¹⁶ Chris Morrison, *Waterton Chronicles: People and Their National Park*, (Lethbridge: Goathaunt Publishing, 2008), 121-123.

¹⁷ "Brass Bell is Camp Clock," *Lethbridge Herald*, July 29, 1968, 9. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

¹⁸ The buildings were used for several years after the government buy out as accommodation for the participants in the Youth Conservation Corps Program.

¹⁹ "Camp Inuspi Sold," *Lethbridge Herald*, April 20, 1971, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.

²⁰ "Federal Parks Policy to Ban Private Leasing," *Lethbridge Herald*, April 27, 1971, 12. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 17.