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First Session of Camp BB - Riback 1956



Please email the office if you know the names of these campers.
If you have old Camp BB photos or artifacts to donate, please contact us at
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JHSSA #2526

Camp BB-Riback: Memories Midor L'Dor

BY MAXINE FISCHBEIN

For three generations, Camp BB-Riback — originally known as Camp B'nai Brith — has provided a phenomenal Jewish camping experience for youth from Alberta, Saskatchewan and beyond on the shores of Pine Lake near Red Deer, Alberta.

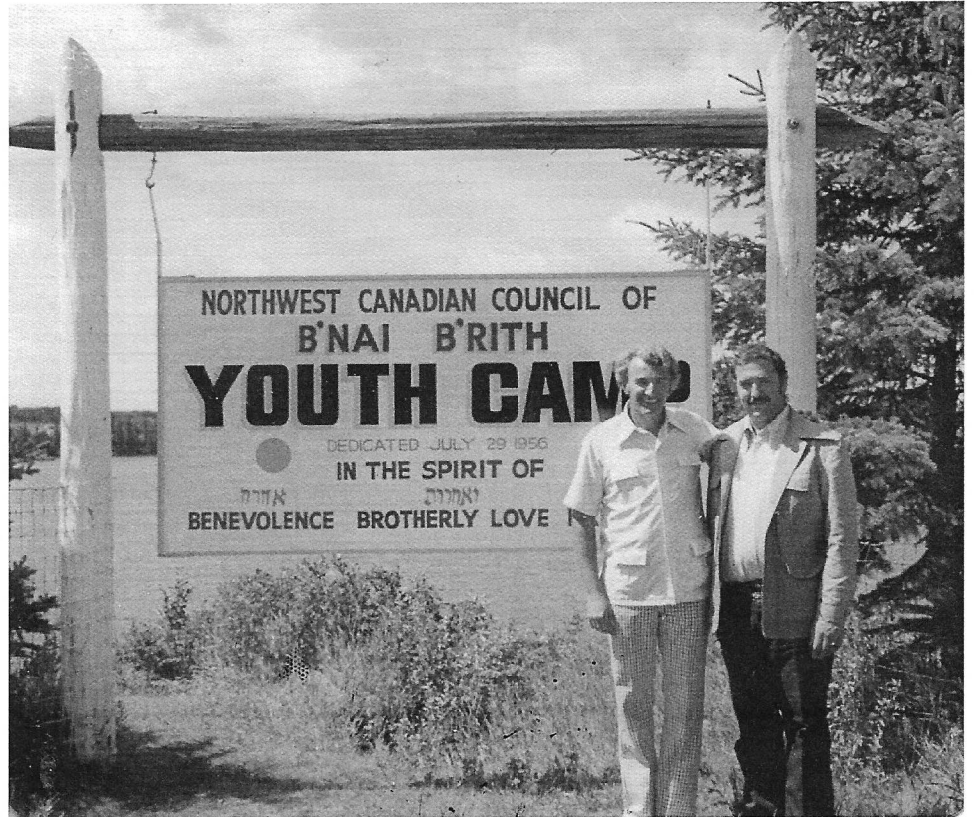
“The camp’s success is due to the power of the peer experience,” says Edmontonian and former board chair Geoff Sky, who remembers the thrill of learning new skills from teenaged counsellors he looked up to and, in turn, teaching outdoor skills to the kids who followed him.

Since 1956, kids from Western Canada and beyond have enjoyed great summers at Pine Lake and although all of them grow up — and most move on — it is clear that Camp BB-Riback continues to hold a special place in their lives.

Former campers and staff, many of whom hail from multigenerational Camp BB families, have taken much pride in giving back to the camp and the Jewish community at large.

Former Edmontonian Josh Staav, who now serves the Calgary JCC as manager of marketing and events, recalled that Camp BB played a major role in moulding him. A camper every summer since the age of eight, Staav later worked as a Junior Counsellor, Senior Counsellor, LTP Coordinator and then as an Assistant Director.

“I always really enjoyed camp and decided I was going to keep going until



Sascha Grunberg and Bill Meloff in front of Camp sign, August 3, 1975. JHSSA #3080

they said I couldn’t go back anymore,” said Staav, now 27.

Nobody told Staav he couldn’t return ... he simply moved on to other positions of increasing responsibility as a full-time Jewish communal professional. These days he’s “back at camp” as a member of the Camp BB-Riback board of directors.

Lessons learned during summers at the camp continue to inform his professional life and his ongoing participation as a Jewish lay leader. Camp buddies remain his nearest and dearest friends.

This is no surprise to Aron Eichler, who in 1956 was Camp BB’s first Director together with his late wife, Ida, with whom he returned to Pine Lake once again to run the camp between 1968 and 1970.

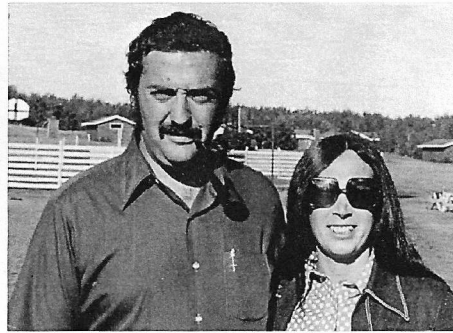
“Friendships that were made there were everlasting,” recalls Eichler who delightedly attended weddings of campers who met at Camp BB. Edmonton couples who tied the knot after camp romances include Edmonton Jewish community leader and former Camp Chair Howie

Sniderman and his wife Debbie (nee Hamburger) and Geoff Sky and his wife, Lauren.

Lauren’s parents — the camp’s longest serving directors, Bill Meloff z”l and Rivvy Meloff (nee Richman) — also married after a camp courtship that began in 1958. Bill introduced horses to the camp that year and was the resident cowboy. Rivvy was the Israeli song and dance director.

The rest, as they say, is history. The Meloffs’ grandson, Michael Sky, 18, is returning to camp this summer to help run the waterfront. According to his grandmother Rivvy, he has ambitions to one day follow in the footsteps of his grandparents as camp director. His brother Billy also returns this summer as a Counsellor in Training.

Camp BB has spawned numerous Jewish leaders whose networks can be traced all the way back to highlights like the Maccabiah sports day, a time-honoured tradition first instituted at Camp BB by Aron and Ida Eichler.



Left to Right:
Camp B'nai Brith
Dinner, January 1957.
Aron Eichler (camp
director, speaking)
and M. Ted Riback.
JHSSA# 625.43
Bill & Rivvy Melloff,
JAHSENA Archives.
Justice Tevie Miller,
JAHSENA Archives.

"Camp helps children to grow physically, mentally and Jewishly, including a love for Israel and Jewish people everywhere," recalled Eichler in an interview last year. "They learn about Judaism and about living in peace and harmony with others."

North American studies confirm that kids who go to Jewish camp are far more likely to engage actively in Jewish life when they reach adulthood.

This is precisely the vision that drove camp founder Ted Riback when he championed the establishment in the 1950s of a Jewish camp on the shores of the lake then known as Ghost Pine. So dedicated was Riback to the cause, that he even lived on site during the construction of the camp over the summer of 1955, working closely with Calgary-based architect Jack Abugov who drew the plans and assisted in overseeing construction.

But what really "lit a fire" under Ted Riback was a disaster-in-the-making that he witnessed while visiting his daughter Donna, a senior counsellor at a Young Judaea Camp held in rented facilities at Lake Chestermere, near Calgary.

When they got to one cabin, they couldn't open the door because it was so badly warped. When they finally burst in, they startled a bunch of girls who were hiding there, smoking.

Riback was horrified. Smoking on straw mattresses in a cabin with a door that couldn't open was a recipe for potential tragedy. Riback decided then and there that the Jewish community needed to build their own, safe facilities.

He made it his mission to get B'nai Brith Lodges in Alberta and

Saskatchewan on board, personally traveling to every city and town with lodges in order to raise funds for the purchase of lands he secured at Pine Lake. The camp enjoyed significant support from B'nai Brith and, later, from other key organizations in the Jewish community.

Notably, when a severe recession in the 1980s created great hardship for Camp BB, Edmonton Jewish Federation and the Calgary Jewish Community Council (now Calgary Jewish Federation) joined forces with B'nai Brith lodges and private donors to ensure the survival of the Camp.

Along the way, the camp also enjoyed the financial support of government. Rivvy Melloff recalls the generosity of Horst Schmid, Alberta's former minister of Government Services and Minister of Culture (1975-1979), in providing badly-needed grants to the camp during the Melloffs' second stint as camp directors between 1971 and 1985.

Over the years, generous support within and beyond the Jewish community has allowed Camp BB-Riback to serve religious kids, secular kids, the affiliated and unaffiliated, the able bodied and those with special needs.

Geoff Sky and Rivvy Melloff recall how the first waves of Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in the 1970s brought many Russian speaking Jewish kids to what was then known as Camp B'nai Brith, helping to ease their integration into local Jewish communities.

"I didn't think about it in those terms as a kid," said Sky in a 2013 interview. What I do remember is that we could all be kids and just have fun together."

Sky's mother-in-law, Rivvy Melloff, remembers the influx of Jewish kids from the FSU "as if it happened yesterday." She made it a priority to aid their integration, personally teaching ESL classes daily following lunch in the chadar ochel (dining hall).

"It was amazing to see their progress," recalls Melloff. "Some came to us not knowing a word of English and by the following summer, they were fluent."

Melloff fondly remembers the support the camp received from long-serving Edmonton Jewish Family Services Executive Director Clara Mintz who worked in partnership with camp directors to ensure maximum support for children requiring advocacy, including immigrants from behind the "Iron Curtain."

Other caring community members who enriched the camp experience were doctors – and often their spouses – who did volunteer rotations at the camp.

"I slept better when they were there," says Melloff, recalling with affection the service of Calgary doctor Harvey Rabin and his wife, Rayna. For many years, Rayna Rabin sewed costumes for camp musicals directed by Melloff and helped make hundreds of blintzes as a special evening treat for camp staff during multiple seasons.

In recent years the Rabins' daughter, Erica, a physician at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton, continued the family tradition as a camp physician.

Phil Gordon was another memorable camp doctor.

"To this day, I can picture Phil Gordon playing basketball with one little boy who

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CAMP BB-RIBACK

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badly needed the attention," says Meloff. Like other doctors before and since, the Edmonton physician, together with his wife Tessa, served BB campers with love both within and beyond the infirmary.

According to Meloff, Camp BB was a lifeline in numerous ways, especially for kids and families hailing from smaller towns and cities. Lacking a critical Jewish mass, their hometowns did not provide the same Jewish opportunities enjoyed by youth in communities like Calgary and Edmonton.

Born and raised in Humboldt, Saskatchewan, there was always a special place in Meloff's heart for kids from small communities including some fondly remembered campers from Billings, Montana whose mother had tragically succumbed to breast cancer.

Decades later, Saskatoon native Zac Waldman says that summers at Camp BB-Riback, both as a camper and as a long-serving staff member, have been life-changing. Serving the camp this season as a volunteer nurse between his shifts at the Innisfail Health Centre, Waldman, 21 – who just graduated with his nursing degree from the University of Saskatoon – previously worked as canoe specialist and medic.

He follows in the footsteps of his father, Ron, who spent summers at Camp BB while growing up in Moose Jaw,



Saskatchewan. Zac's younger siblings, Max and Molly, are also veteran campers who will be working at BB-Riback this summer.

"It shows you how passionate our family is about the camp, and I am also very fortunate that camp has given me the opportunity to gain real skills in my professional field," Zac says.

"My Jewish identity was formed at camp. My family isn't very religious . . . Camp gave me a way to learn about Judaism in a fun and unforced way."

According to Waldman, highlights include reciting blessings before and after meals and other fun camp traditions like Shira, or singsongs that include traditional and Modern Hebrew music.

"I couldn't have experienced it in Saskatoon to the same extent," says Waldman who, like other members of very small Jewish communities, is particularly grateful for having had the opportunity to enjoy immersive Jewish camp experiences in

the company of an expanded range of peers.

Many Jewish children do not have the benefit of extensive Jewish practice or involvement at home. For them, in particular, Jewish camp provides a valuable portal. And even for those already immersed in Judaism, Jewish camp provides a peer experience that helps to deepen their experience.

"Leaving your family and your community to go to camp has been a cornerstone in the development of Jewish leaders since the beginning," says current Camp BB-Riback Director Jerrod Henoach.

And by the beginning, he means THE beginning.

In Parshat Lech Lecha, God tells Abraham to leave his home, go to the wilderness and learn to be a leader.

"I like that Lech Lecha tells us to 'go away' and 'go to yourself'. Both of these things are what camp is all about" says Henoach.

"It happens with Moses too - wilderness, freedom, and a greater sense of who you are and who you want to be, as a person and as a Jew".

Camp is also about those pioneers who had a vision and left a legacy to grateful individuals and communities in Alberta, in Saskatchewan and beyond . . . people like Calgary's Morris Hector and Edmontonians Mickey Dlin and Tevie Miller who rose to the occasion when camp founder Ted Riback came calling, encouraging the North West Canadian Council of B'nai Brith to generously support the establishment of the camp.

It's about early camp coordinators like



Jerrod Henoach with Donna Riback, supplied photo.



Camp B'nai Brith First Session Campers, 1956. JHSSA #2526

Abe and Rose Segal and long-serving camp chairmen like Burton Margolus.

It's about the people for whom "good enough" wasn't good enough . . . benefactors like Calgarians Harry and Martha Cohen whose eponymous swimming pool was dedicated by Alberta's Lieutenant Governor Grant MacEwan in 1968.

"The pool was a really wonderful addition to the camp," recalls Rivvy Meloff. "It allowed us to provide swimming lessons. The kids were very excited to achieve their swimming levels at camp."

Another capital project that greatly enhanced camp life was paved tennis courts, says Meloff. "It was just terrific. Campers played throughout the day and the staff would often play at night. I enjoyed taking lessons too."

Although the tennis courts are a thing of the past, Meloff says she's impressed with the ropes course, climbing wall and zipline enjoyed by a whole new generation of campers.

Other notable improvements over the years included a new Arts and Crafts building in 1976 in memory of Edmontonian Mickey Dlin. Though that building was later replaced with the new Jr. Side Clubhouse, the legacy and the memories remain.

A twister narrowly missed the camp in the summer of 2000, wreaking havoc in a nearby campground and trailer park where 12 people were killed and more than 100 injured. The Abugov Centre (named for Jack Abugov) -- a state of the art, tornado proof building featuring A & C, dance

studio, staff lounge and multipurpose space -- was dedicated in the wake of that tragedy when the community, supported by additional funding from the Provincial Government, rallied to ensure the safety of campers.

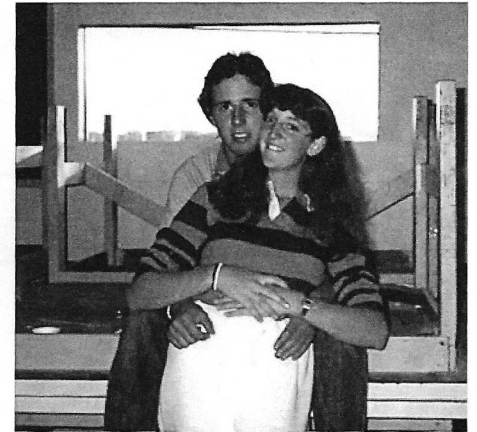
Similar generosity has been a hallmark of the camp since its inception with many dollars raised at honouree events saluting dedicated camp volunteers and benefactors including Edmontonians Herb Leon and Associate Chief Justice Tevie Miller and Calgarians Harry Cohen and Dr. Sidney Gelfand.

When Ted Riback was in his 90s, he was thrilled when approached by former camp chair Howie Sniderman who enlisted his help in once again bringing the camp to new heights. Proving that one is never too old for camp, Riback sprung back into action with energy normally associated with people half his age. Yet again, he gave generously to the camp, rallying additional support from friends and community leaders, and he was delighted when the camp re-named itself in his honour.

"It was important to the camp to teach kids that people like Dad worked very hard for this thing that they treasure," recalls Donna Riback.

"When Dad turned 100, all the kids at camp sang Happy Birthday to him as I held the telephone for him. It was an especially happy moment for him, as was the giant birthday card signed by all the campers."

The card continues to hold a place of prominence in Donna Riback's heart and



Geoff Sky & Lauren Meloff, ca. 1980, JAHSENA Archives.

home.

Meanwhile, Camp BB and Camp BB-Riback hold a special place in the hearts of thousands of campers and counselors from Alberta and Saskatchewan and numerous other towns and cities throughout North America and around the world including Israel, Europe and Asia who have, as the famous camp song proudly proclaims, "put on your blue and white sweater."

"Oh we'll sing and dance

And we'll find romance

And we'll have fun while we're here!"

The history provided in the foregoing article is representational rather than exhaustive.

Sadly, there isn't the space to pay tribute to all the individuals who have served Camp BB and Camp BB-Riback as coordinators, chairs and directors. They are fondly remembered by all whose lives have been touched by the magic of Camp BB!

Former Edmontonian Maxine Fischbein is a Calgary-based freelance writer and proud mother of two grown daughters who were raised with the help of Camp BB-Riback. Her article is based on pieces she wrote previously for the Edmonton Jewish News and the Jewish Free Press (Calgary) as well as archives from Camp BB-Riback, JAHSENA and the Jewish Historical Society of Southern Alberta.

If you have stories, names, photographs or information that will help us preserve the history of Camp B'nai Brith and Camp BB-Riback, please consider documenting and sharing them with JAHSENA and/or Camp BB-Riback.