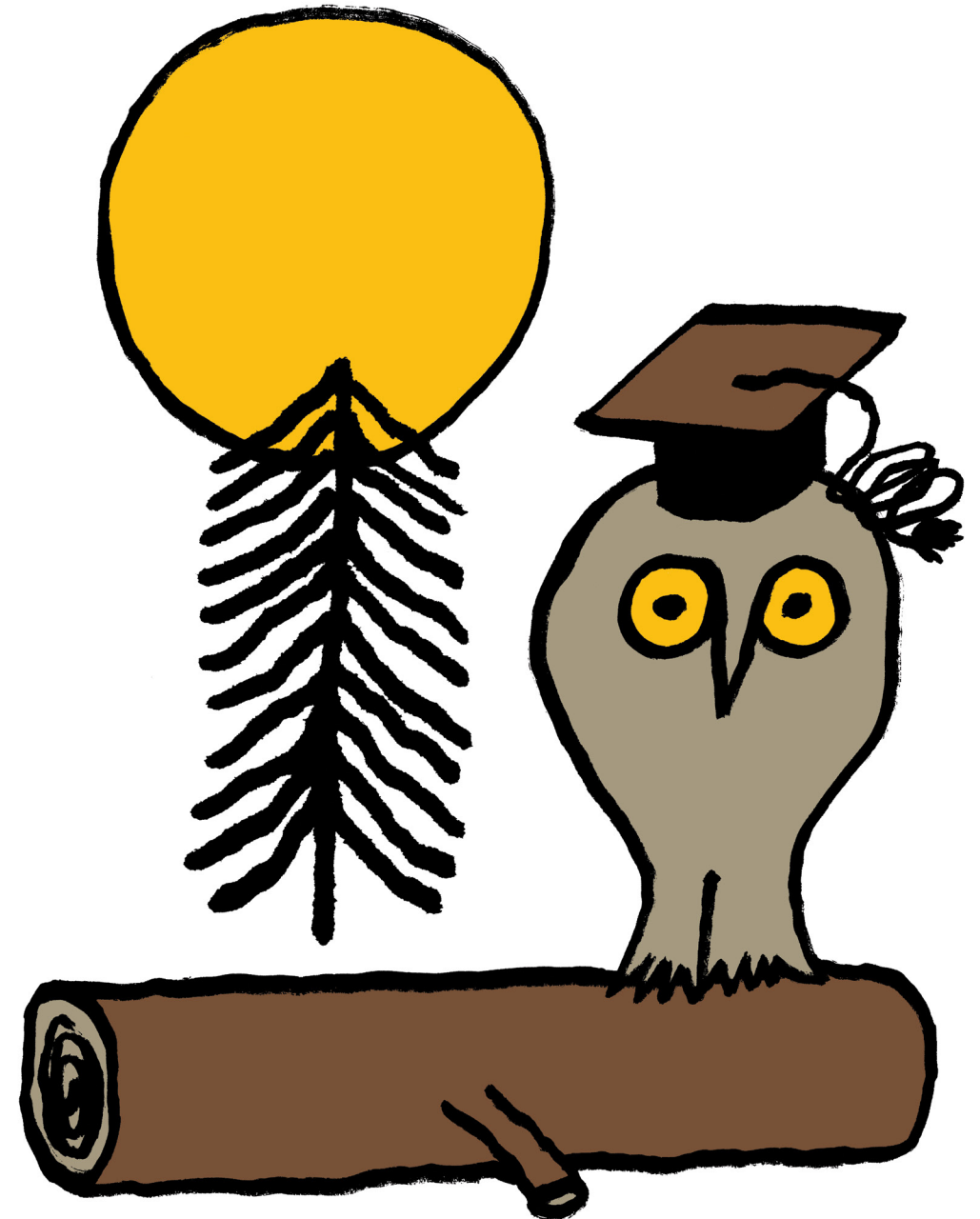
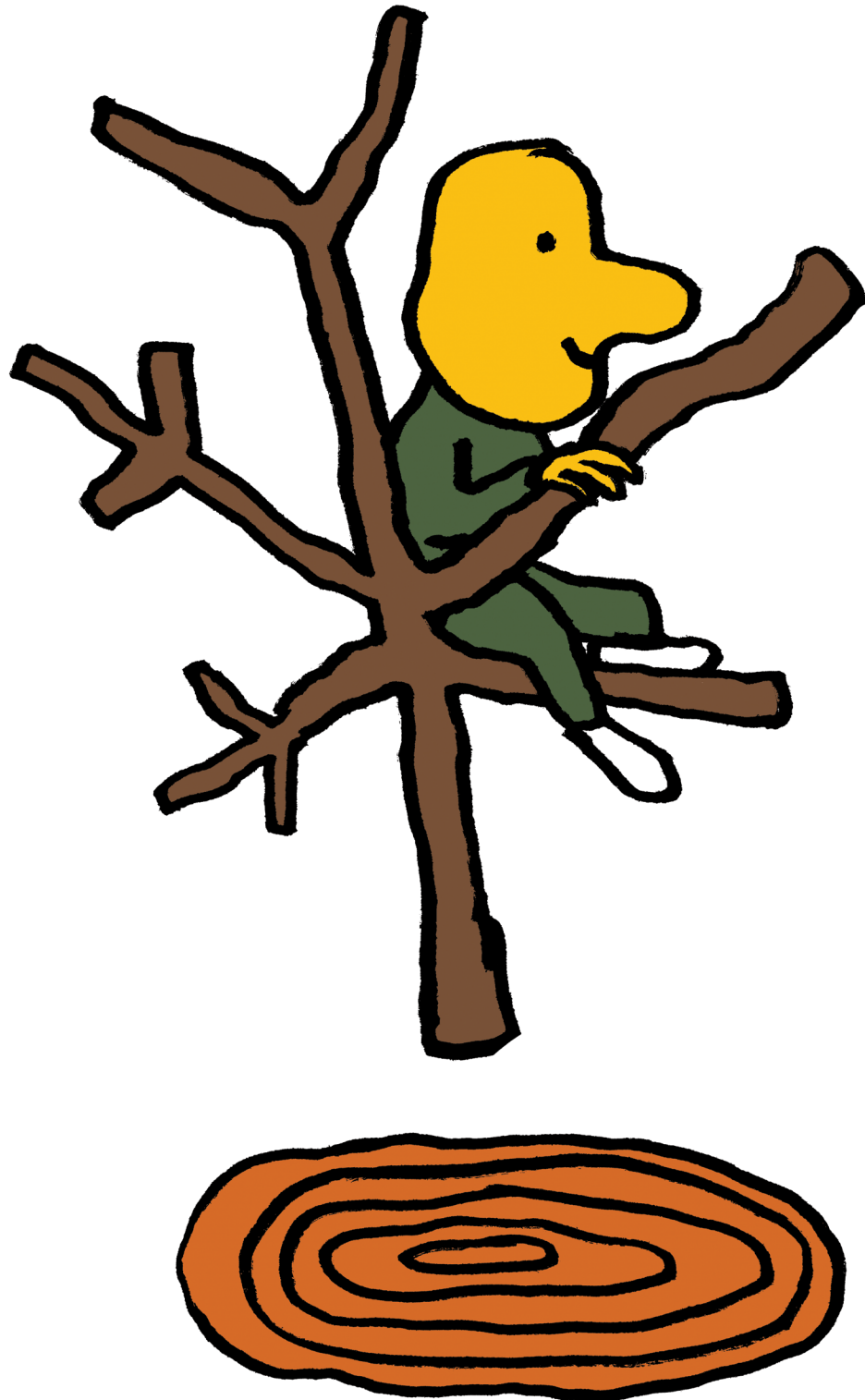


NOTES ON CAMP:

Campfires, canoes... coding?
This generation's summer camps
look very different to the last.





I THINK OF MYSELF as one of the lucky ones. For a stretch in my childhood, my parents packed my bags, wished me luck and shipped me off to summer camp. It was never for the whole summer—eight days at a Catholic-run girls camp deep in Muskoka cottage country; two weeks of YM-CA-subsidized fun near Clear Lake, which more than lived up to its name—but the impressions have stuck. At 30, I can conjure the early morning flag-raising and secular-ish mess hall “grace”; the crackle of birch bark in a fire pit and the smell of smoke in my braids; the cabin bunk beds with wipe-clean mattresses the thickness and softness of a King James Bible; bonding with girls from hometowns I’d never heard of and enjoying night after night of uninterrupted stars—so different from the view from my Toronto suburb.

To look at the sheer breadth of options available to campers today, the traditional sleepaway camp has never seemed so dated. Far from the campfires-and-canoes image of democratized outdoor leisure so many of us grew up on—fostered as much by life experience as by either version of *The Parent Trap*—today’s

modern camps look suspiciously like school. In glowing prospectus photos, smiling kids learn about coding and rudimentary robotics, study second and third languages and infiltrate laboratories at top universities. Is this camp, or are these expensive academic hothouses where the privileged spawn of helicopter parents grow their lead?



It’s a question that educators, academics and camping professionals are increasingly contending with. “This is a thing that we argue about all the time on campus: When is camp not camp any longer, and when is it just an extension of school or academic development or professional advancement?” says Ryan J. Gagnon, an assistant professor of parks, recreation and tourism management at Clemson University in South Carolina.

But in reality, many of these programs don’t so much disrupt notions of camp as expand on their initial conceit. The ideal of summer camp as a sacred site for fun, growth and communion with nature has always been something of a fiction, tinted at once with nostalgia and optimism. “Fun was always a central mandate of camps, definitely. But it was never the exclusive mandate,” explains Leslie Paris, author of *Children’s Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp*. “There was always a sheen of, ‘This is going to be educational; this will be good for [children’s] socialization; this will be good to develop them body and mind.’”

The image of camp that exists in the popular imagination dates to the late 19th century, as industrialization drew Americans of all classes—as well as new immigrants—into dense cities. At the time, parental concerns about what constituted a well-rounded summer education were decidedly different.

The earliest institutions, Paris explains, were spawned from the anxieties of middle-class, educated white men in Northeastern cities who worried about how urban living

"When is camp not camp, and when is it just an extension of school or academic development?"

Researching this story brought back lots of memories for writer Allyssia, including the time she decided to introduce herself at camp roll call as Ally, “who I imagined would be more fun and popular and less self-conscious and, shall we say, *niche* than Allyssia.” The rebrand was surprisingly successful, and she became something of a camp Queen Bee for the summer. “Looking back, it obviously wasn’t the nickname that got me out of my shell that summer, but the audacity and confidence,” she says. “They’ve both served me well ever since.”

would impact their sons in the long run. "They were concerned the boys of their class were going to become effete," she explains. "They weren't going to have outdoor, vigorous activities that challenged them to build a kind of muscular manhood that would let them become the elite men of the next generation."

In 1881, Dartmouth student Ernest Balch founded Camp Chocorua in New Hampshire—often cited as America's first children's summer camp—with a Thoreau-like zeal for the restorative power of nature. By that point, many urban centers had started introducing months-long summer breaks into the calendar (then, as now, the rich fled dense, poorly ventilated cities to escape summer heat) which made

it the perfect season to squeeze in life lessons between academic grades. At his camp, Balch corralled well-to-do campers into swimming, canoeing, water sports, baseball and other traditions that have become synonymous with camp and "character building." This spirit of soft education would persist as camps grew in popularity and were embraced by caregivers and children alike across all demographics.

But the mission was never just about building character:

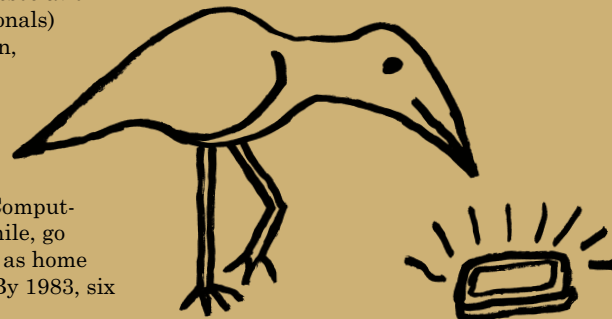
At Camp Chocorua, for example, Balch made the instilling of entrepreneurial skills a big part of his mission. "There were some camp directors who gave lectures in natural history to their campers and some who offered tutoring in the summer," Paris says. "There was always a kind of hybridity."

Skills-based specialty summer camps like the ones we see now aren't unprecedented either. People have been sending their children to academically inclined summer camps since the 1960s, when Congress backed the creation of "Science Island"—a residential camp off the coast of Maine with a mission to provide America's "most able youngsters" with "opportunity, guidance, and inspiration to become worthy and dedicated scientists."

In the 1970s, as an economic recession, cheap international travel, and the post-Baby Boom dip in demographics forced many traditional camps to close, speciality camps became a booming industry—so much so that athletics organizations such as World Championship Tennis (a precursor to the Association of Tennis Professionals) and the NBA union, as well as sporting legends Pelé and Joe Namath, opened their own camps to capitalize on the trend. Computer camps, meanwhile, go back nearly as far as home computing itself: By 1983, six



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years after the first computer camp was founded by an engineering professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut, the American Camping Association had 120 accredited camps that offered computer programs.

Just as the rarefied offerings have evolved, so too have attitudes about the purpose of camp. "There certainly has been rising anxiety in recent decades among many middle-class parents about whether their kids will achieve the same standard of living that they have, and concern about how to give them opportunities to succeed," says Paris.



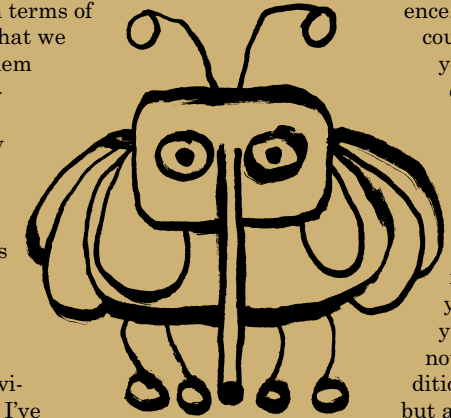
Gagnon agrees: "It's like an arms race almost, if everyone is going to coding camp then Ryan and Allyssia [are] not going to get into that computer science program because we don't have the coding background that all of our peers do. It's awful to think that we're excluding a whole group of kids that might not have the financial ability to get [into one of these camps], or they might just not have the interest yet."

However, Gagnon points out, these academically-inclined camps can also level the playing field, particularly when it comes to camps that target communities typically underrepresented in sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics, such as women and people of color. "STEM camps offer a safer context to fail up and learn experientially," Gagnon explains. "These camps offer a mechanism... to show other people [how to make] their way into this realm that's traditionally dominated by white dudes."

Such was the intention behind Black Girls CODE, the San Francisco-based non-profit that has provided tech education to girls of color across America since 2011. "What's most unique about the summer programming at Black Girls CODE

is that it has been customized specifically for black girl demographics. [The curriculum] connects not only with the values that we uphold, or how we'd like this generation to evolve, but also in terms of the hope that we hold for them to help advance the technology industry," says Kimberly Hollins, BGC's curriculum and education manager.

"In our environments, I've seen quotes and surveys of young black girls saying, 'Wow, I've never seen so many girls like me,' and that in and of itself speaks to the need to center their identity in the tech sector." Ultimately, the camping sector reflects the ever-shifting priorities and anxieties of parents and caregivers, and the looming demands of the adult world. People have always wanted what's best for their kids, but the bar is constantly changing.



"If you're running a camp, your customers are the parents."

"If you're running a camp, your customers are the parents, and as a parent, you want to know if your kid is better and different because of this experience," Gagnon says. "As Barry A. Garst, one of my very best colleagues, says, 'You fund what you value, and you value what you fund.'"

What those values are changes not only from generation to generation, but also from family to family and child to child. But the defining value of camp has less to do with the lessons kids are taught than the things they learn about themselves from the experience. I probably couldn't tell you the proper way to maneuver a kayak, but camp was never really about that. What called me back year after year—and not just to traditional camps, but also French camp and musical theater camp—was the thrill of escape and independence. Away from the familiar, camp offered the freedom to be my authentic self; it was a safe place to take risks, and the chance of finding a tribe I couldn't find at home.

Camp is for kids, but it's where I grew up. In 15 years, the kids building balsa wood bridges on college campuses will probably tell you the same thing. The curriculum may change, but the core lessons are the same. **k**