July 4 Fun in 1911

Let's camp at Uncle Henry's!

When I think of Fourth of July celebrations, I still recall that of 1911, when I was 3 and my family lived near Bear Lake, in Manawa, Wisconsin.

My uncle, Henry Smith, had built his first one-room cottage on the lake and named it Kamp Kumfort.

A few weeks before the Fourth, Uncle Henry persuaded my father, Ernest Axtell, to get a tent and bring his family to the lake for the holiday. Dad jumped at the idea.

There were two 9- by 12-foot tents with a large tarp to stretch between them. There also were cots with canvas springs to be placed in the sleeping tent for each of us.

The other tent served as the cooking tent with a table for our meals. Dad built two long benches for each side of the table and a small bureau to hold the two-burner oil stove. He also collected a 5-gallon can of kerosene and boxes of groceries.

On the departing day, Dad borrowed "Pete," Uncle Henry's big gray horse, and the Democrat wagon was loaded. In a short time, we were at the lake. Dad and my 13-year-old brother, Earl, soon had the tents staked down, facing each other, and the furniture in place.

Dad had made a large, flat-bottomed boat for the festivities. We spent hours pushing it around in the water, and the older members of our group enjoyed diving off it.

They would fill it with water and tie it at the shoreline, and that was my playpen when the adults were out in deeper water.

Fun for Everyone

My mom, Emma, was not a camper. She spent most of her time over at Kamp Kumfort, visiting with Aunt Ruth and doing “fancy work.” She strongly stated that she did not like bugs and crawly things on her.

My sister, Alta, could not leave her cat “Purr-cy” at home, so he became a camper, too. There was a litter of kittens at the camp that Purr-cy would occasionally play with. Even Pete, the horse, would sometimes go into the water with us.

Close by our tents and the camp, someone had sunk a large, brown tile around a beautiful little spring. Clear, cold water boiled up into the tile constantly. We always had fresh drinking water just by dipping our pail into it.

We also had fresh milk. Every night, at milking time, someone would get in the canoe and row up the lake to a farm—they would fill our pail directly from the cows.

One evening, Uncle Henry’s daughter Pearl and her husband, Ben, took me in their canoe to get the milk. When we reached the landing, Ben stood up to step out of the canoe and over it flipped. I had no more than hit the water and Pearl had me up and dripping. The canoe was righted, and we safely arrived back at our camp with the milk.

The Fourth arrived sunny, but with a cold wind. In the afternoon, all the big folks started a ball game in the field across from the camp. I was too little to play, but I remember Uncle Henry reached down to get a ball and ripped the seat out of his pants. He hurried to the cottage and went to bed while Aunt Ruth sewed up the seam.

In those days, even little folks could shoot firecrackers. I had my own piece of punk. These sticks of glowing embers to light the fireworks were purchased especially for this purpose. I also had

packages of tiny fireworks and some sparklers.

Sparked Excitement

The adults tried all sorts of tricks with their own firecrackers, like putting tin cans over them or tossing them over the lake and having them explode before they hit the water. After dark, Dad shot Roman candles out over the lake.

During that week, Dad's cousin, Ward Hanson, arrived from Chicago on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. That was one of the highlights of our adventure.

There was one other incident that I'll never forget. A group of ladies set a date to come and have a picnic lunch with us. Dad told Mother he would cook a pot of beans for her share toward the meal and worked on them all morning.

The beans were finally cooked to his satisfaction, and he removed them from the oil stove and set them on the end of one of the benches.

Just then, the ladies arrived. Aunt Sally, a jolly, heavy woman, saw my father in the cooking tent. She went in and plunked herself down on the other end of that bench.

When she sat down, the beans flew up in the air, turned completely over and landed on the ground.

Dad stood there for an instant, staring. Then he said, "There goes the whole pot of good beans!"

He turned, picked up his rod and tackle box, climbed into the boat and paddled to the far side of the lake. We saw no more of my father until the sun was setting and the ladies were long gone.

How much enjoyment one can get from memories! Start making your own memories now for your enjoyment in the future.

By Dorothy Hudson, Wolcott, New York