

## Summer Camp Redux

### Part I - 1963

In 1963, just after my high school graduation, I boarded a train for Ely, Vermont where I was to be the cook's assistant at an expensive, girl's camp on the shores of Lake Fairlee. Upon arrival, the kitchen staff was informed that we were the help, and the help was not allowed to associate with the White campers or counselors; we were to address each camper as "Miss;" and we could not set foot in Lake Fairlee.

I was incensed and wanted to bolt. But, I had no way to get home and no home to return to. My mother had died a few months earlier and I had neither heard from my absentee father in years. Beenadeewin was to have been my interim home until I entered college that fall. From my South Carolina front porch, Beenadeewin's offer of room, board, a round trip train ticket, and \$300 in exchange for two months' labor had seemed fair. I also dreamed of finally learning to swim in the beautiful lake pictured in the camp's brochure.

Mrs. Lee, the head cook, six other teen-aged girls and I quickly settled into the routine of preparing and serving gourmet meals for 200 people, three times a day, seven days a week. Every Sunday, afternoon, the resident handyman took us sightseeing in the camp's old, woody station wagon. I marveled at the beauty of the Vermont countryside, and the quaintness of its villages. I surmised from the stares that our little group always drew, that no other Black people had ever lived in, or visited, the state of Vermont. An overwhelming sense of being different, and unwelcome, permeated my entire experience. I vowed that once I left Vermont, I would never return.

One Sunday afternoon I made a pilgrimage to the forbidden Lake Fairlee. Looking out over the vast, mirror-like expanse, I grew angry. White people had no right to bar me from something God made for man? Since they thought my skin would contaminate their lake, I decided to do something that really would contaminate it. I stepped into the water, lowered my panties, squatted, and peed.

My Beenadeewin experience remained a part of my consciousness. Mostly, I recalled negative things like how cold the summer mornings and evenings were, how hot it was in the kitchen as we prepared all those meals. How most of the tears I shed while peeling tons of onions were not caused by the onion's fumes. . . What I never thought about was what I learned that summer, and how it illuminated the course my life would take.

Several years ago, a friend suggested I write about my Beenadeewin experience for a competition. To my surprise, the essay was selected for inclusion in the book, *Children of the Dream*. However, it did not exorcise the bitterness of my Vermont experience. Last year, I learned to swim, and wanted to swim in Beenadeewin's forbidden lake. When the word "Beenadeewin" appeared in the subject line of an incoming e-mail, I curiously perused a long message from a woman named Cathy. "I'm a Beenadeewin alum," she said. "I was one of the 'privileged white girls' at camp. Nostalgia drove me to Google.com in search of information about the camp where I spent nine summers. I went to your web site and read your somewhat tormenting essay on the summer of '63."

"I remember," she said, "begging our counselors to invite The Lees to join us on nights when we danced in The Hearth. I don't remember ever seeing the Lee family enjoying Lake Fairlee, Mt. Garfield,

walking on pine needles, etc. I remember asking once why the Lees couldn't be more 'visible' and being told that's the way they want it. Now I know that wasn't true."

Fury again filled my veins. They had passed us off as members of one big happy family! And lied to the campers about our segregation! Cathy's memories triggered my own. . . Rising while it was still dark outside and making my way through the pine scented forest to the kitchen. The smell of Maypo simmering in huge vats. The creaking sound of an industrial-sized toaster dropping golden slices from its revolving conveyer onto a tray, while I used a pastry brush to slather each slice with butter before pressing it into a plate of cinnamon sugar. The feel of the oil on my hands as I squeezed out the little dough balls that made up Mrs. Lee's famous clover leaf rolls.

Cathy's letter continued. "I'm sorry it was a painful summer for you. But your experience there was obviously a learning one, too... though so different from mine."

It had been a painful summer. But the summer had ended, while I had locked the pain inside, ignoring the good things I learned. Maybe Cathy's discoveries as a camper had not been that different from mine as a cook. Since she had taken the risk of writing so openly and honestly to me, I wrote back, thanking her for her insights, and telling her of my recent swimming accomplishments, and plans to return to Vermont.

She replied. "I hope that you'll jump in that lake, make a big splash, laugh and enjoy it as I wish you could have all those years ago. Breathe in that musky air and exhale all those difficult memories."

Will I be able to do just that? I don't know. I do know that I will salute Lake Fairlee properly this time. At seventeen, like all the other girls who slept near her shores, I learned self-sufficiency, pride in achievement, how to endure hard work to achieve goals, and to observe people who were different and find the common ground in our lives. Best of all, I learned to cook, a skill I use daily. During my summer in Vermont, I think I deciphered the code for survival in a hostile world. Isn't that what summer camp is all about?

## Part II - 2003

I've been back to Lake Fairlee! The experience was marvelous and fully exorcised my demons. My friend Ann Cefola, who's summer house is in Chester, and three other friends (Linda, Angela and Terry - one black, two white) accompanied me on my journey. The first morning I awoke in Vermont, Ann handed me a FedEx envelope. "This is for you," she said. "It's a letter from the governor of Vermont."

Why would the Governor of Vermont be writing to me? I wondered.

"Read the letter," Ann said. I did.

"Dear Ms. White, I am happy to welcome you to Vermont where tranquility and pleasure merge into one great Green Mountain experience.

I understand that you came to Vermont as a young person to work at a summer camp. There is no doubt that you will notice many differences from those long-ago days. Like you, we have all had a journey of growth. Vermont has benefitted from our diverse communities and, hopefully, you will

experience some of our diversity firsthand. Again, welcome, and best wishes for a most memorable visit. Sincerely, Howard Dean, MD, Governor.

I cried as I read the letter. It was a far better welcome than I had received in 1963. "How did he know about my coming back?" I asked.

"I told him," Ann said. "I sent him to your web site to read your Summer of '63 essay."

The second day of our trip, the five of us left Chester in early afternoon, armed with a Vermont map that guided us north along Route 91. We passed White River Junction and continued toward Ely. I was apprehensive about ever finding the exact area since you had said that Beenadeewin was gone when you returned in '91. My friends were certain we would find it, since we were on a "fated" journey. Sure enough, we soon encountered the first of many signs that led us straight to Lake Fairlee. As we drove along the two-lane road that surrounded the picturesque lake, I looked for familiar memories, but found none -- until we passed Camp Fairlee. I grew excited thinking it might once have been Beenadeewin.

We entered Camp Fairlee's stone gates and drove along a dirt road past several cabins on raised stilts. "Is this it?" my friends kept asking. I shrugged. "Maybe, I'm not sure." Then we passed what resemble Beenadeewin's old dining hall/the Hearth. "I think this is it!" I said excitedly. We asked a woman sitting in front of one of the cabins if the camp had once been called Beenadeewin. "I don't know," she said, "but the owner's an old timer. He'll know." She pointed in the direction we had come. "His house is down in the other direction, across from the tennis courts. Go ask him."

I was far too excited to get back in the van. I set off toward the dilapidated dining hall. It looked abandoned. On one side, a wall of windows faced far away mountains. I followed its second story wrap-around porch looking for the kitchen entrance. A fence covered in overgrowth stopped me at wide steps that led up to a side door. I climbed the stairs, crossed the porch, and peered through the dusty glass of a side door. A sudden breeze blew the door open, and I cautiously stepped inside a large, low-ceilinged room. Rows of green vinyl lounge chairs held vigil in one area. A grand piano was pushed to one side.

"Is this it?" Linda asked as she followed me inside.

"It looks like it, but it's kind of different," I answered. "It doesn't have the food counter between the kitchen and the dining room. But it does have a big stone hearth like I remember."

"Do you remember these?" Linda asked, pointing at two colorful, abstract mosaics that flanked the fireplace. "No," I answered.

"You'd surely remember these," she said.

I followed a side corridor and peered into a dimly lit, dusty, institutional kitchen, wondering if it was the place where I worked that long ago summer. I raised my camera to take a photo, but my shutter wouldn't activate. Was the universe trying to tell me that I was in the wrong place?

"Let's go see the owner," Linda urged. "He'll be able to answer your questions."

Back in the van, I followed the dirt road toward the entrance, then, down, and around until I reached the tennis courts. At a small cottage surrounded by a colorful garden, Ann got out and went to question the owner. When she emerged from the house, an old couple accompanied her to the gate.

They introduced themselves as the Kummels and shook my hand. "No, this was never called Beenadeewin," Mr. Kummel said. "Beenadeewin's long gone. They made a park out of it. They call it Treasure Island. You passed it just before you got here."

"We need to get gas," I said. "Where's the nearest station."

"There's only one in the area," Mr. Kummel said. "It's in Thetford." He gave us directions to Thetford, then added, "Check the air in your right front tire. It looks a little low." We thanked him and drove to the gas station. At the self-serve station, we made payment in its annexed country store. I immediately recognized the place. In 1963, I had purchased my one and only pack of cigarettes there! I looked around the store and found a rack of Vermont tee shirts. I chose one that read "Vermont, the Green Mountain State" as a souvenir and got in line to pay for it. A gangly, bearded local struck up a conversation. "Beautiful day," he said.

"Yes," I agreed. "I wasn't sure yesterday's rain would ever stop."

"Yes, by God, it sure rained hard. I was going to a fiddling contest but decided to stay home. Have a good day," he called, after I paid and turned to leave. I thanked him and smiled. "Anyone with a smile like that, is sure to have a good day," he added. I wondered whether Vermont's governor had also issued an "All-Points Bulletin" about my arrival, and ordered everyone to be nice to me?

We backtracked to the lake, found Treasure Island and handed two teen aged boys guarding the gate our two-dollar admission fee. We parked under tall pine trees, made our way toward the lake, and settled our belongings on a blanket in a grassy area. "Shall we swim first or try to find remnants of the camp buildings," asked Angela. "Let's look for camp remains first," I answered.

We quickly explored the small strip of undergrowth and trees that lay between the highway and the sandy shores of Lake Fairlee. Like my first visit to Vermont, all that was left of Beenadeewin was memories. We followed a dirt causeway that led out to the small island in Lake Fairlee. At water's edge, my friends produced poems they had selected to commemorate my return to Vermont. Terry, a documentary film maker, recorded their readings and my response.

"Now, let's go swimming!" I said.

"Sure," they all said. "You go first -- we'll take pictures." The afternoon was sunny and lots of children and adults splashed in the lake. The water was cold as I waded in, and rocks and pebbles studded the sand beneath my feet. I pushed forward and immersed myself. It was invigorating, though I had expected the water to be crystal clear. Instead, it was cloudy, and I couldn't see to the bottom. But that didn't matter. I was swimming in Lake Fairlee! Afraid to venture far out, I stayed near the first marker line and floated on my back. Then, I watched a little boy repeatedly climb up a metal slide at water's edge and plunge into the lake. I climbed up behind him, sat down and paused to look out at the lake. Linda stood at the bottom in waist deep water, ready to capture my descent on film.

"Raise your hands up as you slide," she called! I did and a scream of excitement escaped my lips as I plunged toward the water. "You have to do it again," Linda said, "I didn't get a picture."

I gladly repeated my plunge, and again screamed with delight. Those screams exhaled all my old anger. "Will you take a picture of all five of us?" I asked a mother sitting at water's edge with her children.

"I'll be happy to," she said. "I was watching all of you with envy. You really look like you're having so much fun."

"We are," I replied. "We are." Arm in arm, we stood smiling in the waters of Lake Fairlee as she memorialized the moment. For a brief interlude, we recaptured the childhood fun of summer camp. Later, we lay sunning on our blanket and reviewed the success of our journey. No longer was it my journey alone. Linda, Ann, Terry and Angela had gone back in time with me. We'd become Vermont soul sisters - just like so many other Beenadeewin campers.