

Camp Swig:
A Camp For Generations

An Essay
Presented to
The California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Foundation of Camp Swig.....	2
Kathleen and Charles Norris.....	2-4
Ben Swig.....	4-5
Camp Swig Facilities.....	5-6
Camp Swig's Purpose.....	6
Camp Swig Sessions.....	7-9
Helen Burke.....	9-10
David and Michelle Plachte-Zuieback.....	10
The Holocaust Memorial.....	11-12
The Sale of Camp Swig.....	12-13
Renovations.....	14
Conclusion.....	14
Notes.....	15-16
Bibliography.....	17-18

Introduction

Camp Swig, in the coastal hills near Saratoga, has a rich and important history to the Jewish community of the Santa Clara Valley dating back fifty years. The site is located seven miles from Saratoga Village, on Big Basin Way and is 220 acres of beautiful wooded land and hilly terrain. It is a place where Jewish youth have been able to be immersed in their religion. It is a place where Jews are not a minority, and can explore their heritage while meeting other Jewish peers. Everyone leaves Camp Swig feeling proud of their heritage with strong ties to new and old friends. Year after year, the Camp is blessed with great artists, counselors and campers who help make Camp Swig an amazing experience.

Foundation of Camp Swig

In 1952, Camp Swig's founders had a vision to create a permanent summer camp for Jewish youth in the Saratoga Mountains. A group of rabbis from the Pacific Association of Reformed Rabbis met at Lake Tahoe to discuss the concept of establishing a camp for Living Judaism. At that time, the world's Jewish community was trying to recover from losing six million European Jews during the Holocaust. Jews had assimilated so well into American culture that Jewish leaders realized that they had to find new ways to keep their Jewish traditions alive. The vision of starting a summer camp where Jewish youth could be nurtured was a bold move, especially one located on the West Coast, far from traditionally large Jewish populations. Living Judaism was considered a revolutionary new experiment to make Judaism a meaningful part of day-to-day life. The original vision has grown over the past fifty years, and Camp Swig is still alive and well.

Kathleen and Charles Norris

Before Camp Swig was established, the site was a summer retreat for the Norris Family. In 1919, Kathleen and Charles Norris bought 200 acres of land located on Big Basin Way. They named their estate "La Estancia," which means "The Ranch."¹ The Norris's lived at La Estancia during the summer with their son Frank, adopted son William, and three children of her late sister, Mrs. William Rose Benet.² They lived in the main house and had wooden cabins along Saratoga Creek for summer guests. Guests often

included other members of the Norris's large family who were invited to stay and enjoy the peace and tranquility of the property. The Norris family and their guests frequently played croquet on the main lawn for entertainment. The main lawn area by the ranch house has a cobble stone wall. The cobblestones were native to the Santa Clara Valley, and were a commonly used architectural feature on craftsman style buildings and bungalows.³ The Norris house was in this architectural style and the garden wall has the folksy rough finish of stones plucked from the riverbed and plastered into the wall. A fun feature of the wall are the little bench-like niches built into it for sitting, relaxing and watching the croquet games on the adjacent lawn.

Kathleen and Charles were literary figures at the time. Charles wrote many magazine articles. Kathleen wrote eighty-eight novels, magazine articles and newspaper articles between 1911 and 1959. She wrote novels of a wholesome America. Kathleen was known as the champion for an idealistic way of life. She said, "I write for people with simple needs and motives because I am like that myself."⁴

The Norris's were an active part of the Los Gatos community. They participated in some of the local Los Gatos community activities. The Norris's are remembered with warmth and affection by the Saratoga Historical Society. Charles died in 1945, but Kathleen lived at the Norris' home until August 1952 when she sold "La Estancia" to the Jewish Camp

now known as the U.A.H.C. (Union of American Hebrew Congregations). Kathleen died in January of 1966.⁵

Ben Swig

The new camp, originally called Camp Saratoga was formally dedicated on Sunday, August 2, 1953, and was used for two and three-week camp sessions. After the first few years, Camp Saratoga ran into financial troubles. A Jewish businessman and philanthropist named Ben Swig made a large donation to keep Camp Saratoga alive, and later made an even larger long term contribution which helped the Camp build for the future. In honor of Mr. Swig's contributions, Camp Saratoga was renamed Camp Swig.

Ben Swig was born on November 17, 1893, in Taunton, Massachusetts. His parents were Simon and Fannie Swig. He went to Taunton High School in Taunton, Massachusetts. Swig and his wife had three children; Melvin M. Swig, Betty Swig Dinner, and Richard L. Swig. A humorous story involving Ben Swig occurred on October 18, 1947 when he woke up one morning at his family home only to find that his garden pond was missing the 250 fish, which usually inhabited it. Swig took a closer look into the pond and he discovered a well-fed crocodile. Always the philanthropist, Ben donated the offending reptile to the zoology class at Sequoia Union High School.⁶

On December 20, 1947, Ben Swig and J.D. Weiler became the owners of the Fairmont in San Francisco, which they bought for one million

dollars. In May of 1954 he began building a 1,250-car garage by the convention hall in San Francisco which he also owned. The garage cost twelve million dollars to construct.⁷ Ben Swig's philanthropy was well known. He gave donations to many Jewish organizations as well as non-Jewish charities. He was also very generous to universities such as Stanford, University of Southern California, Santa Clara, a few other Jewish academies, as well as his many generous donations to Camp Swig. On November 4, 1977, Swig told the Santa Clara University alumni that if they raised five hundred thousand dollars for their school he would match them with an equal amount. Ben Swig died on October 31, 1980 at the age of eighty-six. In explaining his feelings on charitable giving, he said, "There are no pockets in shrouds."⁸

Facilities

From the original farmhouse building and guest cabins along the creek, Camp Swig has added to its facilities over the years. Camp Swig now has a large dining room more commonly known as the "Hadarochel,"⁹ the Hebrew word for dining room. It also has an Olympic size pool and a multipurpose building for art, music and drama programs. This room is more commonly known as the "Ulam,"¹⁰ the Hebrew word for social hall. Camp Swig has a large athletic field where ultimate frisbee and other sports are played. There is a rope course high in the air that tests your limits and nerves. There is also one tennis court with a view of Saratoga Creek. Some

of the special activities offered at Swig are gymnastics, archery and nature hikes.

Camp Swig Purpose

Camp Swig was introduced as a camp where study and recreation would be combined in a balanced program. Made to fit the needs and abilities of each age group, Camp Swig emphasizes Jewish education. Children are exposed to the Jewish culture, history and religious information. Campers explore Jewish music, art and traditions with their peers. Camp Swig was originally designed to be a teen camp until the 1980's, when it was expanded to include campers as young as seven years old.

Camp Swig attracts campers from all over the Western United States, Canada, Alaska and Hawaii during the summer sessions. Every age group has it's own type of camp. The themes of each camp session vary. Some campers belong to synagogues in their communities and others do not.

Rabbi Jim Kaufman said about Camp Swig, "It's the reason I'm a rabbi. This is my thirty-third summer here, starting in the early sixties when I came here as a camper. Eventually I became a counselor-in-training, a counselor, a song leader and the director of the Hebrew camp for the summer. In 1973 I returned as a rabbi, and I've been coming back ever since."¹¹

Camp Swig Sessions

Teens eat, drink, and sleep Judaism at Camp Swig. After staying at Camp Swig for even a short time, Hebrew words find their way into one's everyday vocabulary. Due to the increase of Jewish teens coming to Camp Swig, the U.A.H.C. added two more camp sessions for this Summer. The first session is Chalutzim, the Hebrew word for pioneers, which is for fifth through seventh graders. It is an eight-day overnight camp session. The second session is Gesher, the Hebrew word for bridge, which is for sixth through eighth graders. It is an eleven-day overnight camp session.¹²

Some of Camp Swig's most favorite summer sessions have been around for years. Hagigah, the Hebrew word for Holiday, is a four-week session at Camp Swig offering different visual and performing art experiences. Participants have a choice on what art activity they wish to pursue. There are always different artists in residence for this session with varied specialties. Over the years, the Hagigah session has offered metal welding, painting, writing, mosaics, stained glass, pottery, illuminations, performing arts, music, song writing, dance and photography.

Machon, the Hebrew word for beginning, is a ten-day session which teaches teenage Jews how to become leaders. Campers are taught to work together, develop problem-solving and leadership skills. In the end, campers create their own special leadership programs. At the same time, there is a four-week session called Kivun, the Hebrew word for honor. Kivun talks to

you about teen issues. It prepares teens for the tough choices they make every day regarding relationships and peers.

Solel, the Hebrew word for pave, is an intensive Hebrew language learning experience. At this four-week session campers are taught the Hebrew language in an exciting way. The teachers are mostly young Israelis though there are some Americans who are fluent in Hebrew as well. To be in Solel campers must already know how to read Hebrew. Solel teaches the ability to speak in a modern Hebrew tongue and blend into the Jewish homeland of Israel.

Teva, the Hebrew word for nature, is a four-week session based around nature. Campers are taken on many hikes and learn the Jewish perspective of Tikkum Olam – *repairing the world*, while focusing on the wonders of nature and environmental awareness. Teva's most important rule is to always have some water and wear sunscreen. Another four-week session at the same time is Hevrah, the Hebrew word for a group of friends. Hevrah is all about social action. Hevrah campers dive into a special projects every year. Hevrah also stresses Tikkun Olam but from a more social action perspective. Important past projects during Hevrah have included saving trees, gun control and peace demonstrations. In 1999 Hevrah had the topic of saving the trees. Campers worked diligently on the topic and found hundreds of articles written on the subject. The Hevrah campers ended that year's session with a field trip to the California State

Capital to discuss state issues. They also traveled to San Francisco to speak with Senator Diane Feinstein's office about saving trees. They petitioned on the streets of San Francisco to stop deforestation and got hundreds of signatures. This shows the social action and dignity that Camp Swig infuses into every single camper.

Helen Burke

The summer programs at Camp Swig always have had many artists in residence. One reoccurring theme is weaving art into the curriculum and connecting with one's Jewish values. In 1967, Helen Burke was invited to join the Camp Swig's art faculty for two weeks. She fell in love with Camp Swig and ended up living there year-round for the next twenty years as an artist in residence. Helen adored the redwoods and the smell of the Scottish broom, which blossomed all round the campsite, but most of all she loved the children.

Helen Burke was a non-Jew born in Idaho Falls, Idaho. She was raised on a farm in Chico. Helen was an artist with many skills. Her work has been displayed at the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles. She made the metal sculpture for the "Tree of Life" room at congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco.¹³ She designed many pieces of Jewish ceremonial art for synagogues throughout the United States, Canada and Israel. She also helped conceive and construct the Holocaust memorial at Camp Swig in Saratoga. She instructed campers of all ages on how to weld copper and

make mosaics. Over many years, campers helped Helen construct a large copper gate at the entrance, six copper hanging lamps, a large copper arc with beautiful copper doves on top, and a gigantic half circle mosaic of the biblical tree of life and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Helen felt that the building process was more important than the finished project. She would have as many people work on the project as possible just to make them feel involved in the final project. She said, "It took years, but every butterfly, every leaf, every crescent moon was made by a different child."¹⁴ Helen Burke died on April 12, 1997, at the age of eighty-one in Sacramento after a short illness. Ruben Arquilevich said, "She probably is the greatest hero that Camp Swig has ever had."¹⁵

David and Michelle Plachte-Zuieback

Helen's shoes were hard to fill. Her vision of integrating art into the camp program was visionary. Current summer programs attract many types of artists from many different areas. The current head artists in residence are David and Michelle Plachte-Zuieback. The Zuieback's have been professional stained glass artists since 1978. David and Michelle work as a team. In 1978 they opened their art studios in Willits, California. They have been teaching stained glass at Camp Swig during summers for over twenty years and received the 1983-1984 California, Art Council Exemplary Arts in Education Grant. Their studios are now located in Santa Rosa, California.

Holocaust Memorial

As the site's needs expanded, the opportunity arose to build a unique memorial in memory of the six million European Jews lost in the Holocaust. The memorial would also serve as a synagogue and religious sanctuary. With the donation of \$400,000 from the Naymark family of Saratoga, architect Samuel Noily of Marin County collaborated with Helen Burke to design this incredible building among the Oak and Madrone trees on the hillside above Camp Swig's main facilities. The Holocaust Memorial was designed as a celebration of life and was built in the style of wooden Eastern European synagogues that were destroyed during World War II. Helen Burke had dreamed of building a synagogue in the hills above Camp Swig. Wooden synagogues of the old European style were becoming popular again in the United States to honor the traditions of the past. This particular wooden synagogue "Holocaust Memorial", in the woods was designed and built near the beginning of this new tradition.¹⁶ At first the Holocaust Memorial looks like a simple mountain cabin with a long elevated wooden walkway and a beautiful copper entrance gate that Helen designed. Plain gray beige battened plywood runs all along the outside of the building. Along the entrance walk is a mosaic wall with the words *In remembrance is the secret of redemption* in English and Hebrew.

When you enter the Holocaust Memorial, you become overwhelmed with emotion. Many large windows offer views of the adjacent wooded

mountains. The room seems to leap upward in two great arcs that form the vaulting ceiling. The reddish brown fir planking of the ceiling is lit by a hidden skylight. A welded copper ark made by the children under Helen Burke's direction stands to one side. Mosaic tile work along the entrance pathway and the floor of the adjacent outdoor patio are also the work of Helen and the children. The Holocaust Memorial has been a favorite and highly spiritual place for campers and people to pray or think. Many people fall in love with the Holocaust Memorial and decide to get married there.

The Sale of Camp Swig

In 1998 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations felt a new camp was needed. They decided to buy a new site in Santa Rosa and sell Camp Swig because two Jewish camps in Northern California were thought to be too many. Camp Swig was in bad shape after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and was going to cost a lot of money to repair. On the other hand, the camp in Santa Rosa, Camp Newman, was in much better condition. Camp Swig was going to be sold to a development company that would have used the site for retreats and a winery. However, either side could stop the sale.

The Jewish community was outraged over this proposal. U.A.H.C rabbis and past campers reacted with tears and anger as so many had a strong emotional connection to Camp Swig. Consequently, campers and rabbis in the Bay Area gathered to discuss how they could save Camp Swig.

One of the leaders opposing the sale of Camp Swig was Rabbi Mark Schiftan of Temple Emanu-El in San Jose. Rabbi Schiftan said, "Entering negotiations to sell Swig to a non-Jewish group is the straw that breaks the camel's back."¹⁷ He also asked, "Was there any attempt to notify other Jewish organizations of your dire need to sell the camp? There is a lack of process, honesty and forthright communication in dealing with this issue."¹⁸

Camp Swig needed almost two million dollars for renovations.¹⁹ There were attempts to raise money and ask for donations. Jews in the area began to wake up to Camp Swig's Jewish values. At first people were hesitant to give donations, due to the fact that Camp Swig is on a fault line and since they had just purchased Camp Newman in Santa Rosa which is brand new. Many asked why anyone would want such an old run down, termite infested camp anyway. As time grew short to save Camp Swig the donations began to pour in. Jews from out of the state began to hear news of Camp Swig's financial problems. Shortly before Camp Swig would have been sold, the fundraising paid off and they raised all of the money needed to save the camp. However, this left Camp Swig flat broke. Just thirteen months after Camp Swig was nearly sold to a private developer, someone who wanted to stay anonymous donated another two million dollars.²⁰ To give to a charity anonymously, is the biggest mitzvah, or blessing, a Jew can do. It shows that you wish no thanks or repayment for the good you have done.

Renovations

Now Camp Swig is beginning its new renovations for the future. All the boys, girls and faculty cabins are going to be ripped down. They will be replaced with fourteen larger and cleaner cabins. The six main buildings are going to be remodeled and they are adding two or three new structures. The construction will be done in three stages. Each stage is targeting a small part of the camp so it will still be able to run throughout the year. This summer has the highest enrollment numbers ever and the U.A.H.C. has even purchased a third West Coast camp in Washington state for use by campers living in the Pacific Northwest.²¹

Conclusion

What began as a wild idea has blossomed into a wonderful camp. Camp Swig has given generations of Jewish children many positive Jewish experiences. This compelling force has helped to shape these children, their futures, and the future of the Jewish community. The future of the Jewish culture and religion is strengthened by the existence of Camp Swig.

Notes

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