

Back in the day

Memories of Camp Meenahga.

Kathryn A. Kahler

The Old Station Wagon

*The faithful old station wagon – it's ten years or more.
It's window-less windows and rusty door.
It takes the sailors to Fish Creek to sail up on the bay,
Which they think is a lot more fun – than staying in camp all day.
And it's just as good as a sail when it comes rattling in with the mail.
We have a never station wagon which may be the best.
But still the old one's busy and never has a rest.*

– Kelly Brent, from the *Pack and Paddle* (Camp Meenahga yearbook), 1944

Affectionately known as the “Camp Meenahga Woody,” the rusty old 1931 Model A wood-sided station wagon Kelly Brent wrote about 72 years ago is getting an overhaul, thanks to its owner Gene Rosera, owner of ACAR Restorations in Reedsville, and Bob LeMieux of Green Bay. The woody was a fixture of the girl's summer camp located on Peninsula State Park's grounds from 1916 to 1948. This summer marks the 100th anniversary of Camp Meenahga's founding and a better mascot for the celebration would be hard to find.

Rosera and LeMieux are both proud owners of 1931 woodies. LeMieux's restoration took 5 years to complete.

“It took years and years of collecting quality parts,” said LeMieux. “The chassis is the same as other Model A body styles, but the wooden body makes the station wagon very unique, and challenging to restore. It's rare to see a woody wagon today. Weather, time and critters are not kind to woody wagons. The original wood is only good for patterns to make new wood pieces.”

A serendipitous discovery

Chance played a big part in the Meenahga woody's discovery. Dick Wilcox, retired Peninsula State Park landscape employee, noticed the woody at the shop where it was being restored. He heard the story that it had once belonged to “a girls' camp in Door County.”

Wilcox in turn told Peninsula Naturalist Kathleen Harris. With a decade's worth of knowledge about the camp, she went to inspect the rusted Model A in the shop. As she climbed in the open side, she noticed graffiti on the interior referencing “purples” and

“yellows” along with a girl's name. Knowing that purple and yellow were the camp's colors, Harris phoned park headquarters on the spot and asked colleague Jane Barnowsky to search the roster in the back of the *Pack and Paddle*. The name inside the woody and in the camp yearbook matched. “Oh my goodness,” Harris exclaimed. “The ‘Camp Meenahga Woody’ lives on!”

Camp Meenahga's roots

From its beginning in 1916 until it rolled down its flaps for the last time in 1948, the summer camp on the shores of Green Bay between Fish Creek and Ephraim saw a couple thousand girls take part in its programs. At a time when women saw Victorian mores making way to more modern athletics, founders Alice Orr Clark and Kidy Mabley had to balance society's expectations of femininity with their young clientele's yearnings for freedom, choice and responsibility.

The 1922 camp brochure listed this purpose: *Camp life, with its regularity, its good food, healthy activity, and long hours of sleep, is recognized as the right kind of summer for the school girl. Our aim at Camp Meenahga is to give, to a limited number of girls, a wholesome, happy vacation under the guidance of councilors of culture and refinement. It gives our girls a vacation from fashions and abnormal excitement. It creates a love of nature and the out-of-doors. The lack of conveniences and conventionalities develops unsuspected ingenuity. Camp Meenahga is the emblem of loving comradeship, gentleness and courtesy, as well as promptness and neatness.*



The Camp Meenahga “Woody” as it looks today before restoration.



Bob LeMieux with the 1931 Model A, wood-sided station wagon.

A geared-up camper at Camp Meenahga.

The girls came from all over the country, many from St. Louis — Clark and Mabley's home city — and where they conceived of the idea for the camp. Both women were without husbands (one a widow, the other a divorcee) in search of a means of income that would support them and their children.

The site they chose at Peninsula was the former Simon Evenson farm on Shore Road. The barn and outbuildings were deemed suitable for their purposes and soon converted into a dining room, recreational hall, living quarters for the women and their families, and office space for the camp. Local laborers did much of the work and park crews assisted by building platforms and hanging canvas for tents where the campers slept.

Clark and Mabley were able to make a go of it through both world wars and the Great Depression, in large part perhaps because the camp accommodated girls from upper class families. Fees were \$300 for the 9-week 1922 session, which translates to almost \$4,000 today. The revenue supported not only the camp directors and their families, but two assistant directors, 20 counselors and eight cooks and kitchen workers.

The girls' days were filled with activities like singing, dancing, drama, hiking, swimming and horseback riding, and organized sports like basketball, tennis and baseball. As noted in camper Kelly Brent's poem, one of the wholesome activities open to campers was sailing, and many who were strong

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enough swimmers took moonlight canoe trips up the Green Bay shore to Pebble Beach in Sister Bay and even the tip of the Door (Gill's Rock) for sleep-outs.

So if you're planning a trip to Door County this summer, make it a point to stop by Peninsula State Park and the Ephraim Historical Foundation to check out the exhibits and other activities. Be sure to take a drive up Shore Road to the Skyline Trail parking lot, where Camp Meenahga once stood. Get out of your car, take a stroll down to the water, close your eyes and imagine you can hear the sound of a rusty 1931 Model A woody, rattling along the road filled with laughing girls on their way "to Fish Creek to sail up on the bay." 

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CAMP MEENAHGA SPECIAL EVENTS

For complete information visit wiparks.net, call the Nature Center at 920-854-5976 or email kathleen.harris@wisconsin.gov.

- **July 12 — Camp Meenahga Birthday Bash** featuring a period favorite — red-velvet cake while supplies last.
- **July 19 — Camp Meenahga, Ephraim Historical Foundation, 7:30 p.m.** Attendance is free and open to the public.
- **August 2-3 — Meenahga Antique Auto on Display:** See the original woody and one fully restored. Program free but state park vehicle sticker required. Program canceled if weather is severe.

In addition, the public is welcome to see the Ephraim Historical Foundation's 2016 exhibit titled "Two Roads Diverged: Camp Meenahga and Camp Peninsular in Peninsula State Park." Camp Peninsular was the Civilian Conservation Corps camp located in the park in the 1930s. The exhibit will be on display at the Foundation's Anderson Barn Museum (3060 Anderson Lane, Ephraim) June 17 through Oct. 15. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for students (6-18), and free for children 5 and under.

Sales of Friends of Peninsula State Park Meenahga memorabilia are helping to raise funds for these special events, as well as funds for properly archiving the park's Meenahga collection. Memorabilia include commemorative pins, mugs, and embossed mason jar glasses. A Meenahga history is also in the works, with a summer publication date planned. The book, published by Friends of Peninsula State Park, will include never before published interviews of Meenahga campers and counselors. Go to wiparks.net or contact kathleen.harris@wisconsin.gov for information about the publication. Merchandise is available at Peninsula State Park Headquarters and the Nature Center.