

Recounting the Legacy: The History and Use of FFA Camps for Leadership and Recreation

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FFA camps have provided members with recreational, social, and leadership development for decades. Since the first FFA camps were established in 1928, they have served as a vital piece in the puzzle of FFA leadership development. This historical research study investigated the origins of FFA camps in the United States, the use of camps for leadership development, and the current status of FFA camps by state FFA associations. The study found that three states, Tennessee, South Carolina, and North Carolina established state FFA camps shortly after the FFA was founded in 1928. Several southern states operated separate camps for African-American boys who were members of the New Farmers of America. FFA camps offered a variety of recreational activities, social events, and leadership development programs. Approximately 24 state FFA associations currently offer some form of summer FFA camp for their members.

Introduction

What a beautiful day. Even before the sun is shining, or the birds are singing, it's still a beautiful day. Part of the beauty is getting to wake-up campers for their polar bear swim, or rise-and-shine runs and see them embrace the day with enthusiasm. For FFA Advisors, seeing the fun and energy in the faces of young FFA members often rekindles their own enthusiasm and helps build memories that will last a lifetime. As the day gets rolling, FFA Advisors are sitting on the porch telling each other their favorite camp stories. Some of the stories are akin to fish tales that become grander with each telling; all contributing a little to the long and storied history of the FFA Camp.

For over a century, young boys and girls from across the country have left their homes and families to spend a few days or a week at summer camp. Summer camps have been operated by church groups, 4-H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, and hundreds of other organizations. From the very beginning of formal vocational agriculture and the Future Farmers of America,

camping has been included as a means to build leadership, team spirit, self-esteem, and resourcefulness.

The history of FFA camps is one that every FFA member, advisor, alumni, and agricultural education professional should know. Some FFA advisors know how their own state's camp began, but how about camps across the nation? Do other states have FFA camps? If so, how similar are the activities? How do camps add to the leadership development of FFA campers?

The FFA Camp Experience can take average students and catapult them into over-achieving leaders in their home chapters and create bonds between campers that last a lifetime. The social and recreational nature of camp helps disguise the fact that students are learning soft skills such as leadership, communication, organization and teamwork.

Theoretical Framework

Youth camping has long been a part of the American culture. Millions of young boys and girls spend a few days to a few weeks at camp each summer. Numerous research studies have

investigated how camps benefit youth and help them build their leadership, self-esteem, and interpersonal skills. The organized camping movement had its origin during the mid 19th century. In his book titled *Camp*, Michael Eisner (2005) credited Frederick Gunn as the originator of the use of leisure camping for teaching camping skills to students at The Gunnery, his boarding school in Washington, Connecticut, in 1861 (Eisner; The Gunnery, n.d.). Other sources credit Ernest Berkeley Balch with establishing Camp Chocorua, one of the first youth camps, in 1881 in the White Mountains of New Hampshire (Gibson, 1936; Paris, 2008; Van Slyck, 2006). Balch advertized his camp in a 1882 issue of *The Churchman* (Gibson) when he wrote,

A summer camp for boys; Camp Chocorua, Asquam Lake, Holderness, N.H. opens for its second year, July 1882. Boys are taught swimming, rowing, and fishing, and the practical work of Camp Life. Parents will find here a healthy, happy, outdoor life for their boys. (p. 19)

Another pioneer in the development of the camping movement in New England was Edwin DeMerritte. DeMerritte was notably credited with making the connection between camping activities and nature study for youth at Camp Algonquin which was established in 1886. Gibson (1936) reported that,

Dr. DeMerritte established high standards in nature appreciation and Camp Algonquin was characterized by its emphasis upon the study of nature. One hour a day was given to that study. The camp was well equipped with a nature library, microscopes, herbarium, museum and a fine wild fern and flower garden. (p. 27)

In 1991, Delansky conducted a meta-analysis of previous research on camping. Based on numerous research studies conducted over many decades, she concluded that camping experiences generally have a positive effect on participant's self-concept, aid in the development of campers' social skills and confidence, and help campers to develop positive attitudes towards the environment (Delansky). In a comprehensive study

conducted by the Boy Scouts of America, camping was found to give Scouts the opportunity to participate in physically and intellectually challenging activities, and give them new and rewarding experiences. The report stated that, "positive outcomes of Scout summer camp occur because the environment and activities at camp incorporate all of the elements of healthy youth development (Boy Scouts of America, 2001, p. 4).

Eighty percent of Boy Scouts responding to the survey indicated that participation in summer camp helped them in making decisions, 56% responded that camp helped them reflect on their personal principles and values. Respondents also described how camping helped them try something they had never tried before (86%), test a new skill (81%), learn about the environment (65%), feel challenged (69%), and test their mental/thinking abilities (71%) (Boy Scouts of America, 2001).

In a study of the leadership development of campers, Toupençe (2003) concluded that, "following the camp experience, campers' self-perceptions of their leadership skills in all five scales were stronger (communication, positional leadership, making decisions, working with groups, and understanding self)" (p. 12).

A major study conducted by the American Camp Association (2005) titled, *Directions: Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience* found that both campers and their parents reported increases in campers' leadership from pre-camp to post-camp. A six-month follow-up found additional growth in the campers' leadership compared to immediately after their camp experience. In a study by Readdick and Schaller (2005), school-aged inner-city children scored significantly higher on self-esteem at the end of their camping experience than at the beginning. Campers also reported significant increases in positive descriptions of themselves and self-ratings on popularity. The researchers also conducted observations and interviews with the children and found that physical and social environmental features such as contact with nature as supporting the improvement in their self-esteem.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this historical research study was to develop a comprehensive history of the origin and development of FFA camps as a tool for leadership development within agricultural education students/FFA members. Specific objectives that directed this research were:

1. Describe the origins of FFA camps within agricultural education in the United States.
2. Describe the use of FFA camps for leadership development activities within agricultural education students/FFA members.
3. Describe the current status of FFA camps by state FFA associations.

Methods

This research utilized a mixed methods approach. Historical and survey research methods were both used in this study. Patton (2002) stated that, "Multiple methods and a variety of data types can contribute to methodological rigor" (p. 68).

Qualitative historical research methods were used to investigate the origins and history of FFA camps throughout the United States. According to Borg and Gall (1983), "Historical research involves the systematic search for documents and other sources that contain facts relating to the historian's questions about the past" (p. 800). Both primary and secondary sources were utilized in this research study. Primary sources included *The Agricultural Education Magazine*, agricultural education historical books, meeting notes, and personal communications. Secondary sources included historical texts, periodical articles, and newspaper articles. Research was also conducted at the National FFA Archives at Indiana University ~ Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). All references were exposed to internal and external criticism. Each document was reviewed to determine its authorship and authenticity. Internal criticism allowed the researchers to evaluate the documents in relation to the objectives of the study.

Survey research methods were also used in the study. The target population for the survey was the camp directors of all state FFA camps.

The researchers contacted state FFA leaders in each state to ascertain if the state operated a summer camp and to identify the camp director. The Camp Directors were then surveyed to collect qualitative and quantitative data related to their FFA camp. The target population included 31 camp officials from across the country.

The Camp Directors were then sent an email cover letter inviting them to complete an on-line questionnaire that included questions about the origins and history of their FFA camp, the types of programs offered at camp, the camp directors and staff, and the number of FFA members who utilize the camp.

For the purposes of this research, the term FFA "camp" was operationally defined as a summer camp program that includes a variety of activities including recreational, leadership, and social events. The camp would be operated by FFA staff members and open to any FFA member. The duration of each camp experience should be from a few days to a week. Camp facilities that were owned by the state FFA associations and those that were rented/leased for the camp program were included in the study. Short-term leadership development conferences and workshops such as *Made For Excellence* were not included in the definition of FFA camp.

Results

The history of organized camping in agricultural education goes back to the very beginning of secondary vocational agriculture and the Future Farmers of America. The state of Tennessee is given credit for establishing the first state FFA camp in the country. The following quote appeared in both an article titled *Twenty Years of FFA* (Farrar, 1948) and the *FFA at 25* history book (Farrar, 1956). Farrar (1956) wrote:

In 1928 the Future Farmers of Tennessee, under the leadership of State Supervisor D. M. Clements, now assistant chief of the Agricultural Service, Office of Education, began work on what probably was the first state FFA camp. Local chapters raised money, some gifts were received, and the legislature authorized use of state funds for developing and maintaining the camp.

‘Camp Clements,’ as it was named in 1934, still is one of the finest FFA camps in the nation. (p. 15)

Much credit has been given to State Supervisor of Agricultural Education, D.M. Clements of Tennessee for championing the benefits of FFA camps. In 1933, Floyd wrote,

The F.F.A. chapters in Oklahoma owe a debt of gratitude to State Supervisor, D.M. Clements of Tennessee. In February 1928, he wrote ‘My Dream for the Future Farmers of Tennessee’ in which he pictured a beautiful F.F.A. camp down on the Caney Fork River. This dream was so inspiring that we in Oklahoma dreamed of the same thing down on our beautiful Illinois River. That little spark touched things off. (p. 191)

South Carolina was another state that started to develop a state FFA camp shortly after the founding of the FFA (FFA and NFA Camps Established, 2002). Local Rotary Clubs donated 50 acres of land in the mountains of Oconee County in 1928 for Camp Tamasee, the first South Carolina FFA camp (Keels, 2002). In 1936, a second FFA camp was established on the Atlantic coast near Bluffton. During the 1950s, the two FFA camps were sold and a new camp in North Myrtle Beach was purchased for Cherry Grove Camp.

The idea for permanent state FFA camps probably stemmed from the many camping trips that local FFA chapters were organizing. Throughout the 1930s, there were many reports of the benefits of FFA boys participating in summer camping activities. In 1932, the Georgetown and Bridgeville chapters in Delaware held a joint camping trip. In an article about summer camps in Delaware, Mowlds (1932) wrote that,

We hope that next summer several other chapters will find it possible to enjoy a similar camping trip. The benefits are many, the cost is low, and F.F.A. boys should get together occasionally for the good of the group as well as the individual. (p. 207)

The State FFA Reporter from Utah (Malouf, 1933), reported that “An extensive vacation was

had this summer by members of the Richfield, Utah, chapter of the Future Farmers of America, who combined recreation with education in a 12-day tour in southern Utah, Nevada, and California” (p. 48). The Reporter also wrote that, “The chapter members made a similar trip to Yellowstone National Park last year. The outstanding success of both of these trips fully warrants that this vacation idea be continued” (p. 48).

With the noted benefits of camping trips for FFA boys, there was a new desire for establishing more permanent state FFA camps. Peters (1934), in an article about the Vermont FFA camp wrote, “A summer F.F.A. camp without any established state camp is a problem that our chapter solved last summer by establishing a camp of its own” (p. 191).

The decade of the 1930s saw an explosion of new state FFA camps. State FFA Camps were reportedly held in Arkansas (Smith, 1933), New Jersey (New Jersey F.F.A. Summer Camp, 1934), Wyoming (Wyoming F.F.A. Summer Camp, 1935), and New Hampshire (Summer Camp Activities, 1936). In an article about the North Carolina camp, Thomas and Osteen (1937) wrote, “The Young Tar Heel Farmer Camp is a feature of the state organization...It is owned by the state organization and is for the purpose of offering a week’s outing each summer by every chapter electing to do so” (p. 176). The North Dakota FFA camp was unique in that it was held in conjunction with the Northwest State Fair in Minot, ND (North Dakota Sets Up Summer Camp, 1937).

At the same time that camps were being established for FFA members, similar camps were being created for African-American boys who were members of the New Farmers of America. During the 1930s, several African-American leaders in South Carolina worked together to establish Camp Orangeburg, for NFA members (FFA and NFA camps established, 2002). Tabor (1947) wrote that, “The opening of Camp John Hope in June 1938, gave the first opportunity for state camping to the New Farmers of America in Georgia” (p. 156). Tabor went on to describe in detail the history of Camp John Hope when he wrote:

The progress of building Camp John Hope was long and tedious, but the promotion of the work by many Georgia citizens, who

saw the importance of making available to Negro young people a wholesome, active summer environment, is inspiring as to what can be accomplished by ardent supporters of a project to promote the growth and welfare of modern youth. (p. 156)

Separate NFA camps were still operated in some southern states until the FFA and NFA merged in 1965. W.T. Johnson, NFA Executive Secretary in North Carolina, wrote, "The camping program at the S. B. Simmons Memorial Camp (New Farmers of America) is no different from that of other camps. The major objective is to give each camper a true sense of values and awaken in him a desire to develop into a fine person" (Johnson, 1962, p. 248).

As the Future Farmers of America organization grew in size, state and national leaders saw the benefits of establishing camps for the members. Future Farmer chapters were also participating in trips to interesting educational locations. One of the most popular destinations for FFA members was Washington, DC. Delegates at the 1937 National FFA Convention authorized the FFA Board of Trustees to determine the advisability of establishing a national FFA camp in the Washington, DC area (Tenney, 1977).

In 1938, the convention delegates approved \$6,000 to purchase land for a national FFA camp. At the 1939 National FFA Convention, Executive Secretary Ross reported that 22½ acres of land that was once part of George Washington's Mount Vernon estate had been purchased. The delegates authorized an additional \$12,000 to pay for the land and purchase an additional six acres (Tenney, 1977). An old Grist Mill, once operated by George Washington, was located on property adjacent to the FFA's land. An agreement between the State of Virginia and the FFA was developed that allowed the FFA to operate the Grist Mill and keep it open to the public (Summary, By Years, of Important Actions Regarding National F.F.A. Camp, n.d.). Barracks for housing and a dining and recreational hall were built at the camp. The National FFA Camp officially opened on May 30, 1941 when a group of FFA members from Wilton, Wisconsin stayed at the camp.

Farrar (1947) discussed the National FFA Camp when he wrote,

During summer months, when most organized activity is in a slack season, a week's camping trip by the boys does much to hold them together as an organization, and at the same time gives opportunity for recreational activity that would not be possible to most of them as individuals. (p. 3)

The National FFA Camp proved to be a financial problem for the Future Farmer organization. The closure of the camp during World War II and the lack of sufficient campers to pay expenses ended up dooming the camp. Finally, in 1949, delegates to the National FFA Convention voted to give the Board of Trustees authorization to dispose of the camp (Farrar, 1956). However, the land was never sold but utilized as the headquarters for the FFA Supply Service, *National Future Farmer Magazine*, and eventually the first National FFA Center.

A survey of Future Farmers camps and camping conducted by Higgins (1940) reported that, "Eight states reported camp ownership. These are: Arkansas, 30 acres; South Carolina, 50 acres; Tennessee, 30 acres; Oklahoma, 120 acres; North Carolina, eight acres; Louisiana, 42.79 acres; Kentucky, 100 acres; and Georgia, 150 acres" (p. 54).

Higgins (1940) also wrote about the use of FFA camps for leadership development when he stated,

Evidence leads one to believe that from the camping experience, from the games and activity participation, from the leadership training work and from the resultant educational fruitage comes a better planned and balanced recreational and social program the whole year around. This is especially true in those states whose camping program makes provision for participation and training in the fundamental skills of recreational leadership. The wide scope of planned and spontaneous camp activities reported from the different states gives promise of a desirable carryover into chapter and community well-being. (p. 54)

Wohlford (1940) also discussed the importance of FFA camps for preparing future rural leaders and better citizens. Wohlford wrote that, "Many teachers have sensed the opportunities inherent in the informal environment of a summer camp for the development of character traits and abilities desired in a good citizen. We are finding state camps being developed in several states for use by members of the F.F.A." (p. 214).

FFA camps offered leadership development in a variety of different contexts. Howard (1944) wrote about Ohio FFA Camp Muskingum when he wrote, "Leadership training with special emphasis on conservation is the primary purpose of the camp program, altho [sic] the social and recreational phases will not be overlooked" (p. 236). Dougan (1956) also wrote about Camp Muskingum when he stated that the camp program would include, "...experiences in leadership training, conservation education, and recreational activities where a camp environment can be used most advantageously" (p. 39).

Many camps included organizing the FFA members into groups or chapters. In New Jersey, the state FFA camp was "run by the boys themselves...Each camp village, of which there were two, had a mayor who was in direct charge of the activities of his village" (New Jersey F.F.A. Summer Camp, 1934). Noakes (1950) reported that activities at New York FFA *Camp Oswegatchie* included "The making of decisions relative to program planning and the carrying out of the planned program provided an excellent opportunity for the practice of parliamentary law in the camp-chapter meeting" (p. 84).

In addition to the general leadership training, many camps provided specific programs for training newly elected chapter officers. Montgomery (1950) reported that in the state of Kentucky, "Since all officers attending camp are newly elected, they are anxious to learn their duties and responsibilities as chapter officers and to secure as much leadership training as possible" (p. 263). The practice of using outstanding FFA Advisors and State FFA Officers as camp counselors also goes back to the 1950s. Reporting about the Missouri FFA Camp, Bailey (1950) wrote,

In 1949 the policy of employing the adviser of some outstanding chapter who would be present for half or even all of the season was initiated. This plan resulted in quite uniform programs throughout the season and was so well accepted that it will probably be continued. An attempt is made to have at least one state officer present for each camping period. (p. 255)

A report from the first National FFA Camping Workshop (Workshop Report, 1965), included a panel on the Objectives of FFA Camps. The panel listed "leadership training was the focal point of the camping program in most states, however, conservation education and recreation were mentioned" (p. 7). The panel also suggested that, "Get the camp out of FFA camping programs and emphasize leadership training centers and programs" (p. 7).

In the same report (Workshop Report, 1965), I. A. Dickerson, Director of the Georgia FFA Camp, stated that, "The purpose of the camp is to provide opportunities for boys and girls to develop mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually. This is accomplished by providing programs in leadership training and supervised recreation" (p. 8).

As recent as 1977, the benefits of FFA camps were still being discussed. Comings (1977), past director of Camp Oswegatchie in New York, wrote:

Camping can teach values important to our society. It is an opportunity to live in a community with a concern for basic moral and ethical values, to learn to accept responsibility for personal and group actions, and to live in an atmosphere of honesty and frankness. (p. 269)

FFA camps are still a major component of programming for many state FFA associations. The on-line questionnaire of state FFA leaders found that summer camps are operated by approximately 24 states. These camps are either owned by the state FFA association (20%), state department of education (25%), or another entity such as the state, FFA foundation, or an independent camp board. Table 1 includes the states and the names of their respective FFA camps.

Ten states indicated that their state rents or leases facilities for summer FFA camps. This result is similar to the findings of the survey conducted by Higgins (1940) where he found that “Camps not reported as F.F.A.-owned were conducted on property owned and operated by

the Forest Service, National Park Service, state parks, and Boy Scouts of America” (p. 54). The size of the camps ranged from five acres up to a 6300 acre rented conservation reserve area. Most camps were in the range of 30 to 200 acres.

Table 1
FFA camps operated by state FFA associations

State	Camp Name
Arizona	Arizona FFA Leadership Camp
Arkansas	Camp Couchdale
Florida	Florida FFA Leadership Training Center
Georgia	Georgia FFA-FCCLA Center, Camp John Hope
Illinois	Illinois FFA Leadership Camp
Indiana	Indiana FFA Leadership Center
Kentucky	Kentucky FFA Leadership Training Center
Louisiana	Louisiana Youth Educational Recreational Center
Minnesota	State Greenhand Leadership Conference State Leadership Conference for Chapter Leaders
Mississippi	C. M. Brewer FFA Center
Missouri	Camp Rising Sun
Montana	Montana FFA Alumni Leadership Camp
Nebraska	The Leadership Center
New York	Oswegatchie Educational Center
North Carolina	North Carolina FFA Center
Ohio	Camp Muskingum
Oklahoma	Oklahoma FFA Alumni Leadership Camp
Oregon	12 Regional Camps
South Carolina	South Carolina FFA Center
South Dakota	2 Regional FFA Leadership Camps
Tennessee	Camp Clements
Virginia	FFA-FCCLA Educational and Recreational Center
West Virginia	Cedar Lakes Conference Center
Wyoming	Wyoming FFA Camp

Conclusions and Recommendations

The concept of using organized camping activities existed from the very beginning of vocational agriculture and the Future Farmers of America. Several states established Future Farmers camps beginning in 1928. The states of Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina, are generally acknowledged as having established the first FFA camps. State Supervisor D. M. Clements in Tennessee is credited with promoting the establishment of a state FFA camp in his state. He was even given

credit by FFA leaders in Oklahoma for inspiring them to create a camp for Oklahoma FFA members. In honor of his contributions to FFA camping, *Camp Clements*, a leading state FFA camp, is named after the former State Supervisor.

The decade of the 1930s witnessed tremendous growth in state FFA camps nationwide. Building on the popularity of FFA chapter camping trips, many states established permanent FFA camps. States such as Arkansas, New Jersey, Wyoming, New Hampshire, and North Dakota, all reported camping activities in

the 1930s. Summer camping programs were not limited to white male FFA members. Several states operated separate camps for African-American boys who were members of the New Farmers of America. NFA camps in the states of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina offered similar recreational and leadership activities as FFA camps.

The growth of state FFA camps led delegates at the National FFA Convention to authorize funds for the purchase of land for a National FFA Camp. This camp had limited success in offering FFA chapters camping opportunities in the Washington, DC area. While the National FFA Camp only operated for eight years, 1941–1949, its use as a National FFA Center lasted through the 1990s. The idea of a National FFA Camp for FFA members visiting Washington, DC may have ultimately led to the creation of the Washington Leadership Conference in 1959. This outstanding leadership conference includes having FFA members travel to Washington, tour historical, scientific, and political sites, and participate in leadership workshops; all activities that were envisioned for the National FFA Camp.

From their very inception, FFA camps included a variety of different recreational, social, and leadership activities. Physical activities in nature have always played an important role in FFA camp programming. Organized sports such as basketball, softball, baseball, and swimming were important events at camps. Leadership development played an important role in preparing FFA officers and members for future FFA chapter activities. In 1962, Javornik espoused the importance of these activities when he wrote, “Camping has provided an opportunity for leadership training and wholesome recreation pleasantly intermixed during one week in the schedule for the summer” (p. 250).

State FFA associations currently offer a variety of different summer camping programs. These programs maintain many similarities to the original camps yet have changed to meet the unique needs of their FFA members. Most states now emphasize leadership development more than the concept of camping and recreation. This may be due to a change of philosophy on the part of camp leaders dating from the 1960s. H. N. Hunsicker, reporting at

the first National FFA Camping Workshop (Workshop Report, 1965) stated:

Terms used are not entirely satisfactory, and do not indicate the nature and extent of FFA camping programs in most states. It would create a more favorable attitude if terms, such as leadership training centers, camp and conference centers, etc., could be used to designate [sic] the facilities used to conduct leadership training programs. (p. 6)

Current state FFA camps still provide FFA members opportunities to participate in recreational activities and leadership events in natural settings. Dougan (1956) summed up the benefits of camp when he wrote, “At camp a Future Farmer lives in a realm of youth, in a true laboratory where he actually practices helping to plan by democratic processes for his own leadership, health, religious living, work, and recreation” (p. 39). While FFA camps have changed over the years, they remain an important component of youth leadership development within the National FFA Organization. Over 20 states utilize summer camping programs as a tool to develop premier leadership, personal growth, and career success in their FFA members.

Based on the results of this historical research study, the researchers would like to recommend further investigation into the benefits of summer FFA camping experiences for FFA members. Efforts should be made on the part of state FFA leaders and camp directors to collaborate with other organized camp leaders and the American Camp Association to justify FFA camping programs. Follow-up studies of former FFA campers should be conducted to determine the effects of FFA camp on their leadership development. National FFA leaders should work with state FFA leaders to organize regular meetings of camp directors to facilitate collaborative efforts and further improve leadership offerings at FFA camps.

The long and interesting story of FFA camps goes back to the beginning of vocational agriculture and the Future Farmers of America in 1928. For the past 80 years, state FFA camps have provided thousands of FFA members the opportunity to improve their leadership skills, enjoy recreational activities, make new friends, and create lifelong memories. Based on their

strong history, state FFA camps will continue to play a vital role in the future leadership development of countless FFA members.

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