**35-year tradition ends with camp demolition**

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**By John Warren**

Over a span of 35 years many Church of God youths and adults made a summer pilgrimage to the North Woods of Minnesota. What could draw people from around the world to a secluded retreat three miles from a little town called Orr?

The attraction was a piece of property on Pelican Lake donated by Minnesotan Scott Erickson to the Radio Church of God in the early 1960s.

What started out as a primitive campground developed over the years into the Worldwide Church of God's first-class Summer Educational Program (SEP) for thousands of WCG youths, adult counselors and college-student-age workers.

The Journal contacted Floyd and Mardell Kielczewski of Orr, who lived and worked at the camp for many years.

In 1965 the WCG's first camp director, Floyd Lochner of Pasadena, Calif., contacted the Kielczewskis to ask them to move to Minnesota in February of that year to begin preparations for the camp to open in July.

At the time, Mr. Kielczewski (pronounced kill-ches-kee) was working as a guide and trapper in Canada.

After 35 years of employment as everything from guide to campsite manager, Mr. Kielczewski lost his job with the WCG in May 2000.

**Housing development**

The WCG sold the SEP property in May of this year. A firm called Taylor Construction bought it and is busy developing it as sites for private residences.

"Back in 1965, before Scott Erickson donated the property, he considered dividing the property up and selling lots," Mrs. Kielczewski said. "Now that is what Taylor Construction is doing."

The new owners have conducted auctions to sell the contents of the buildings. In one case an auction took place one day and a demolition crew was there the next day with the wrecking ball to knock down a building.

The Kielczewskis report that all the old buildings except two dormitories and two houses are gone.

"It is just too painful for us to go out there now," Mrs. Kielczewski said.

Mrs. Kielczewski is writing a book about her experiences and memories about summer camp at Orr that should be in print by the Feast of Tabernacles this year.

"It has been a wonderful 35 years," she said. "With an average of 1,000 campers and staff each year, it is almost impossible for us to travel to any state or province where we don't know someone."

**Camp history**

The Kielczewskis worked the first 12 years for Dr. Lochner. In later years camp directors included Jim Thornhill, Kevin Dean, Kermit Nelson and Jeb Egbert.

The Journal contacted John Havir of Huntington, W.Va., because of his long history with the Orr camp and asked for his reaction to the demolition of the property and its rebirth as a housing development.

Mr. Havir first went to Orr as a 12-year-old in 1972. He returned to SEP seven years later as a staff worker. From 1978 through 1982 and from 1984 through 1986, Mr. Havir served on the canoe staff. During the off seasons from 1984 through 1986, Mr. Havir lived at the camp and worked full time for the Kielczewskis.

Mr. Havir told The Journal that, as far as camp personnel were concerned, Floyd and Mardell Kielczewski were irreplaceable.

"Over the years," he said, "camp directors, department heads, instructors, counselors, maintenance personnel and other workers came and went. The Kielczewskis remained. The Kielczewskis are a common thread between all administrations, workers and campers. In many ways they were counselors to the administrations and staff who were involved with camp."

**More than that**

The Kielczewskis were more than site managers.

"Not only are the Kielczewskis the link to the thousands who attended camp from the WCG, they were also the ambassadors to the local community," Mr. Havir said.

"No one knows how many times throughout the years the Kielczewskis were the go-between for the camp and the local community, performing damage control for ill-fated plans of camp administrations or reassuring the community that unchristian behavior from a few camp personnel was not acceptable to them or representative of camp ideals."

The Kielczewskis, he said, "viewed camp from a year-round perspective."

Mr. Havir said he helped out with instructing skiing, canoeing and basketball, as well as in the service and maintenance of the buildings and the grounds.

Mr. Havir remembers the memorable "closing sessions."

"One of the greatest scenes to witness at camp was the last evening," he said. "Depending on the camp director, the last activity of the camp was either a banquet, talent show or dance in the gymnasium.

"While the campers were in the gym, buses would be lining up down by the dining hall getting ready to take the campers to the airport."

After the activity, the campers gathered near the dining hall and got ready to board the buses. "It was at this time the emotions of campers, counselors and staff erupted into tears of sadness," he said. "Strong bonds had been built between all, and the people young or old did not want the experience to end."

**Learn from experience**

Mr. Havir said Church of God members can learn a thing or two from their SEP experiences and the camp's history.

"I think the lesson for those who donate to churches or other ministries is to realize that, once you let go of the money or piece of property, in most cases you lose control of that asset. Beware of where you give your time and money today.

"The camp property has been sold and will never be like thousands once knew it.

"That is sad. Yet the memories cannot be destroyed."

**Team effort**

The Journal talked to Dr. Nelson, who served as program director from 1965 until 1975 and camp director from 1986 until 1994.

He recalls the team effort it took to make the camp sessions a success.

"Each year we would recruit 115 to 125 Ambassador College students to work as counselors and staff," he said. "Seventy-five percent had been to camp before, so we had continuity of leadership. You couldn't have 100 percent new staff because you needed people who had been there before."

During his years as director, Dr. Nelson said about 12 WCG elders and their wives would assist in the camp each session. He said the couples quickly realized they weren't on vacation and were in for a lot of hard work.

Dr. Nelson spoke glowingly about Mr. Kielczewski.

"Floyd really held the place together," he said. "He taught us how to take care of the camp. He put in the lagoon and water-treatment plant, which won awards from the state. He has a good name in Orr and in the surrounding fishing and camping community."

Dr. Nelson said after each session the staff invited the campers to evaluate the session.
"I read every one of those surveys," he said. "Some of the campers would write, 'Call me if you read this.' They would be surprised when I called."

**Fellowship of the canoes**

Most years there were three sessions at Orr, with 288 campers in each session.

Dr. Nelson remembered one year during which there were so many applications that a fourth session was added and recent Ambassador College graduates stayed to work as counselors after the other students had returned for the beginning of school.

The canoe program, a favorite activity for many campers over the years, was a major undertaking.

"The canoe trips really pulled people together," Dr. Nelson said. "When they [the campers] came back they worked as a unit. You could tell which dorms had been on the canoe trip and which campers had not."

Dr. Nelson said that in all his years at Orr only one person left camp after having participated in the canoe trip. That camper had contacted her parents and they were already traveling to pick her up so she had to leave even though she changed her mind after canoeing and wanted to stay.

Dr. Nelson mentioned staff members such as father-and-son duo Gil and Dave Goethals, who worked in many areas including canoeing, riflery, archery, basketball and Christian-living classes.

Others who played leadership roles were Randy Dick, Nate Berg, Larry Haworth, Kevin Kennedy, Jeff Broadnax, Glenn Roberson, Gerald Weston and Ted Budge.

In the early years some camp sessions were six weeks long, but over the years they were shortened. In the 1970s they ran four weeks, and in the 1980s and 1990s most sessions lasted three weeks.

Dr. Nelson says Orr residents used to complain because the camp, as a church-sponsored facility, didn't pay taxes. But "now that we are gone the village realizes how important we were to them in so many ways."

The WCG continues to sponsor regional camps.

Thinking back over his years working with the camp in Minnesota, Dr. Nelson summed up his memories of the staff and facility.

"It really developed and improved over the years," he said. "We wanted to give the youth the best of everything."