

Moral campers

By [Nicole C. Kirk](#)

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It begins in February. Parents scour websites in the often-competitive sport of hunting for summer camp options. The goal is to keep our children happy, occupied and perhaps even learning something during the long summer.

Summer camps are a relatively new invention, introduced in the early 20th century. At first they focused on white lower- and middle-class boys; as camps exploded in number and type, they eventually included girls and other racial and ethnic groups. Early camps focused on shaping the moral and physical character of boys in danger from the urban milieu. Their concerns included

- A growing anxiety over the health and physicality of white bodies—especially in Protestant middle-class circles, as waves of immigrants poured into American cities.
- Among the older generation, a fear that urban boys and men—especially clerks and others employed in shops and stores—were becoming unmanly. Cities drained the vitality of men, and mercantile professions did little for physical strength.
- An anxiety about a growing effeminacy among boys and men, stoked by the feminine influence in homes, churches and shops.

Soon the American YMCA was in full swing, summer camps emerged, the Boy Scouts of America was founded, and American organized sports developed with vigor.

Merchant prince John Wanamaker acted on these concerns when he founded his own summer camp for young store employees in Island Heights, New Jersey. In 1898, Wanamaker purchased five acres on the highlands and began building a military style camp modeled on the YMCA camps of the time. The campers—called “cadets”—slept in tents that offered a practical flexibility and the ability to mimic military encampments. Each camper was issued a uniform and charged with keeping

it clean. When not bathing in the ocean or playing on the athletic fields, cadets performed military drills along the parade ground. In the evening, the camp military band entertained guests in and around Island Heights.

From the beginning of his church work, Wanamaker focused his own outreach on the “rougher edges” of Philadelphia society, working to help young men and boys “reform their character” through his founding of a mission Sunday school, Bethany Presbyterian. Yet he did not leave the fate of his employees to chance. He didn’t send them to the YMCA with the hope they would find a home there. Wanamaker sought to build his own version of the YMCA at the Island Heights camp, emphasizing what he called the Rule of Four: development of strength, heart, mind and will to create “fully-rounded men and women.”

The first camp commenced in 1900, and the central building—“the Barracks”—was constructed in 1904 to provide shelter for staff, a mess hall and classrooms. When Wanamaker later made the camp an option for his female employees, they resided in the Barracks—Wanamaker felt the girls were unable to withstand the elements like the boys and would enjoy a less rigorous schedule.

The orderliness of the camp not only represented the military design but also invited the cadets into a utopian world of perfection far removed from the temptations of city living. As in the Methodist camp meeting village north of the Barracks in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, clear behavioral guidelines and camp regulations drew a clear line between good and bad. Camp life signified the potential for moral perfection, if only one would follow the rules. With the firmly regimented day, Wanamaker attempted to contain what he felt were the temptations of boyhood: rowdiness, immorality and laziness.

As I prepare to send my son to summer camp in the city of Chicago, I ponder how camp has changed—or has it? In his younger years, I sent him to vacation Bible school and a Quaker camp. In the last few years we’ve consistently chosen non-sectarian camps, but our choices still focus on what my son is missing in daily life and how camp can fulfill these needs. Camp is also about socializing with young people he would not otherwise meet in his fairly provincial school setting—although camp often maintains class structure through cost and location.

While many camps have moved away from the military and quasi-religious focus, they still stress the same core values of character. Every secular camp my son has

attended emphasizes good behavior and community building, as symbolized by the ubiquitous behavior contract we must discuss and sign before camp every year. Physical discipline remains on summer camp agendas—even among camps where recreation is limited.

Summer camp has never simply been about extended child care. It has been and is about what children lack—or what we perceive they lack—in their day-to-day lives.

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