

Chapter 11

Tadmor – Camp Director 1949 – 1953

As I think back now, I marvel at the way God led us. The Young Men's Class of Hope Church in St. Louis, under the leadership of their teacher, Mr. Bob Campbell, accepted the responsibility of administering Camp Tadmor for the summer of 1949.

In 1988 when Hope Church celebrated their 100th Anniversary, they produced a book, "*Visions of Hope*," describing much of what went on during that century. As I looked at that book recently, I found some interesting details about how the Young Men's Class became responsible for Camp Tadmor. I quote concerning Mr. Campbell's class of young men:

They had accepted the responsibility of the Tadmor Camp. They conducted three 2-week summer camps, held a Labor Day Conference for 101 for four days, and continued to maintain a Pastor at Tadmor with regular Sunday Services. A report from the Tadmor Committee details their splendid efforts:

In December 1948 the proposition was submitted to Mr. Robert Campbell's Young Men's Class to assume the responsibility of renewing the operation of Camp Tadmor as a summer camp for young people. The proposition was accepted by the class unanimously, and it was decided the entire class would participate and be known as the Camp Tadmor Committee. Officers were elected . . .

On January 8 1949 a group from the Committee made its first trip to Tadmor to survey the situation and lay plans. Every other Saturday from that time on, almost without exception, a group journeyed to Tadmor making repairs, painting, cleaning, building, improving, etc. The remarkable thing about this work lies in the way the Lord supplied the needs of Tadmor. The Class went into the project without any definite financial backing, but every need was supplied.

Applications for Camp Staff were sent to many states and only after much prayer and consideration, the following were selected. . . Paul Mellow, Director; Dave Klasing, Assistant Director and Counselor; Lois Lawler, Counselor; Charlene Waldock, Counselor; Bernadine Mellow, Cook; Elsie and Martha Thornton, Assistant Cooks.

It would be difficult to find a finer group of fifteen young men anywhere. They seemed to be overloaded with talent in various fields. They all enjoyed youthful activities; they included men with special skills in engineering, building, electrical work, financial management and

leadership. Sanford Talley headed up the Board, and Bert Billings accepted the responsibility of keeping track of the finances. And they all seemed to get along together remarkably well. As they started their planning, they drove down to Tadmor every other Saturday to make sure everything was in order for the summer camp season. They did all they could to have the buildings in as good condition as possible.

When they felt they had done a good morning's work, they would try out the swimming hole where "The Big Rock" supplied a reasonable diving platform. And when the afternoon's work was finished they would set up a volleyball net and play till dark. Then the next morning they would show up at Hope Church in time for the Sunday School. They certainly had energy and were excited to be working together in this project at Camp Tadmor.

We faced a serious problem in operating a camp on that farm. Delmar Faust, our farmer, told me that in one thirty-acre hay-field they killed more than thirty copperhead snakes the previous year. We procured the necessary materials to protect children in case of snakebite, but I was worried. One evening I walked up the hill to see Mrs. Kellerman who lived a mile from Tadmor. While there we talked about the danger of snakes, and in the course of conversation mentioned Psalm 91:13, "The young lion and the serpent thou shalt trample under foot." As I walked back in the dim moonlight, I followed the right-hand car-track. For no particular reason I stepped over to the left track and then turned on my flashlight to see if the right-hand track would have been better walking. In the beam of my flashlight I saw a copperhead and realized that if I had stayed on that track my next step would have been on that snake. "Thank You, Lord!"

A few nights later in that same week a couple of the fellows from the Young Men's Class arrived just as we went to bed. They wanted to go frog hunting, and of course I had to go with them. Walking down the road towards Benton Creek, I suddenly stopped and turned on my

flashlight. Directly in front of me were two copperheads lying in the path, just waiting for me to step on them. *Thank You again, Lord! I won't worry about snakes any more.* We took every precaution we could think of, and at the first or second evening of each camp we had the State Agent come and show a film on "Snakes of Missouri." We thanked our Lord for His protection, since during all the camp outings we never had one bit of trouble from the snakes.

Bernadine and I, with Margie, 6, and Ruth Ann, 4, moved in to the Big House with the campers and counselors. When the Committee invited us to serve for that summer, they had already lined up three fine young people as counselors, and completed plans for three two-week camps, one for boys aged 9 to 12, the second for girls of the same age, and the third period for teen aged boys and girls. That first summer, we had approximately thirty children in each camp, and by the end of each camp we had the joy of seeing a number of them accept the Lord Jesus as their Savior. The summer activities closed with a Bible Conference to which the public was invited. The Committee invited a special speaker for the occasion.

Living conditions were primitive, to say the least. Instead of bathrooms, we depended on crude outhouses. We had no running water. The kitchen stove burned wood for fuel, but Bernadine with Elsie and Martha produced superb results under extremely difficult conditions. Bernadine found it a tremendous challenge as she had never cooked for more than her own family. Any time they needed even a loaf of bread it involved a forty-minute journey to the grocery store and another forty minutes coming back. They started off cooking for twelve people, and rapidly increased the number until at the Labor Day Conference they fed 101.

The youngsters, who paid \$14.00 for their two-week stay, enjoyed plenty of activities including shuffleboard, baseball, hiking, and swimming. We took each camp to Meramec

Springs, seven miles away, hiking part of the way and riding in the camp truck part of the way. There we marveled at the magnificent spring that put out thousands of gallons every minute.

Activities at the camp also included pranks and plays, as well as campfire picnics and Bible studies. In the Teen Camp the girls always enjoyed a banquet, creating formal dresses from bed-sheets.

In our first year we arranged for a snipe-hunt one night, and two boys were left “holding the bag” in the dark, a short distance from the camp. Another time just after dark I took the youngsters into a cemetery on our property, and in the folly of inexperience, told a wild ghost story. Bernadine, covered in a white sheet, sneaked in but was spotted prematurely by a youngster who shouted, “Hey, look! There’s a ghost!” Bernadine dropped to the ground, unaware that she was lying in a patch of poison ivy. Next morning she was covered with a severe rash and it would be weeks before she was back to normal. At the climax of my story a tall monument was supposed to sway from side to side, “Look!” I shouted as I pointed to the tallest structure in the cemetery, “It’s waving!” The kids jumped and ran out of the cemetery, one girl even jumping out of her shoes that we had to retrieve the next day. One of the campers came to me the next day. He knew that stone column was swaying in the night, but couldn’t understand how I made it do so. (Needless to say, we did not repeat either of these two exciting activities.)

All too quickly the camp came to an end, and we would have to transport the campers back to the city.

The meetings at that first Labor Day Conference were held on the lawn right outside the Big House, with just over a hundred folks present. I remember that Pastor Thornton brought some of the messages, and even though I have forgotten who else was included, I remember the joy and satisfaction as the Lord blessed us richly from Friday evening through Monday morning.

The Camp Tadmor Committee at that time asked us to stay on the grounds during the winter, using the main room in the Big House as a chapel for the local community. Further, they asked us to plan to operate the camp for the next several years. Sunday after Sunday we held services for those in the community and visited in many of the homes.

During those years the camps grew bigger and bigger, with new activities added each season for the young people, but we also provided a place for groups such as Inter-Varsity Fellowship to hold their annual retreats. We had the honor, too, of serving a group of IFCA pastors as well as others who were glad to take advantage of the beautiful grounds.

Our family moved into the Thornton House, a quarter of a mile from the Big House, where we would have a little more space. It required months of work. The walls consisted of boards nailed on the outside of the two-by-four studs and covered on the outside with a layer of tarpaper. There was no sheetrock or plaster on the inside of the wall. The studs were the wall. I well remember one windy night as we were preparing for bed, and the kerosene lamp was burning in the middle of our large upstairs bedroom. A strong gust of wind blew through the cracks and extinguished the lamp that was at least eight feet from the nearest wall. We did all we could to make it more comfortable, but were not very much amused when fellows from the Class came down and were so pleased with the “*rustic appearance*” of the house. It was not long before we were able to install electricity. But the thing that Margie remembers is the great improvement when we installed fiberglass insulation between the studs. She thought the pink insulation made the house look quite modern.

Of course, working under a Committee 115 miles away involved many trips to the city to attend committee meetings. These trips provided opportunity to talk with people in various roadside restaurants. I recall one morning about four in the morning I stopped at a little shop for

a cup of coffee. When I finished I handed the waitress a “Thank You” tract that told about the grace of our Lord. When she saw the word “Thank you” she broke down in tears, “You are the only one who has had a kind word to say all night!” I found real pleasure in being able to help others even in such a passing contact.

Another time I remember our business meeting lasting late into the night. By the time I drove back to Tadmor it was well past midnight. As I started to open the door, I heard our much-loved Labrador growling. She would not let any stranger into the house to touch my wife or children. It took several minutes before I was sure it would be safe for me to open the door.

During the fall and winter months, we wrote letters to colleges and universities around the nation, as we looked for a nurse and counselors each year. The Lord provided top-notch young men and women. Tadmor seemed to provide a finishing touch as the Lord prepared young men and women for the mission field. Norman Hoyt and Ginnie Gilchrist were two of our counselors in 1950. Both of them were strikingly gifted but utterly humble, totally oblivious of the gifts God had given them. That year we had a special camp for underprivileged boys. Norm found himself that first night looking after an unruly mob of kids. When they wouldn't quiet down he said, “O.K. We're going for a hike.” They went through the woods and across gullies, but Norm was the only one with a flashlight. More than that, he was in excellent physical shape and kept up a good pace. They just had to keep up with him. After a good half-hour of hiking they quickly quieted down, and Norm had their genuine respect for the rest of the two weeks. We were delighted that both of them were available and came to help us the following summer.

By the end of the camp season Norm and Ginnie were engaged. The next year they were married. Ginnie had completed her college course, and Norm had earned his degree from Dallas Theological Seminary. Now they were awaiting final arrangements about traveling to the

mission field in South Africa where they served many years. Later they flew to Romania where they conducted a short-term Bible class. This was so successful that they were called back for another session. Then one day as I was listening to the radio in my car, I heard that they had completed their teaching in Romania. As their plane took off from Bucharest something went wrong and both Norm and Ginnie were among the seventy-eight passengers killed.

Who can forget Charlie Thornton, the counselor/lifeguard with that infectious laugh? He was continually doing something that would lead to gales of laughter. He was quite a musician on his guitar, and if he didn't have the guitar handy, he could substitute with the broom. Since Tadmor days he pastored churches in Illinois and Ohio, and is currently co-pastoring a church with his son Daniel in Alaska.

Then there was Bill Widbin. He never seemed to get tired. If there was a job that had to be done, he did not need anyone to tell him. He saw it and did it, whether it was mopping the dining-room floor, or handling unruly boys. Shortly after leaving us, he and his wife Mary went to New Guinea, where they did a tremendous job creating landing strips in remote parts of the island, enabling Missionary Aviation Fellowship pilots to fly into areas untouched by civilization.

And I must mention Phyllis Erickson, our efficient and beautiful camp nurse. When she left us she studied linguistics at Wycliffe, and then went to a remote area in Brazil where she and her husband, Orland Rowan, translated the New Testament for a small tribe, the Paresis, that would otherwise never have had an opportunity to hear the Gospel. She came home on furlough a few years later, exhausted, and when I saw her I was utterly shocked at how she had aged in such a short time as she gave herself unstintingly for those Indians in Mato Grosso, Brazil.

I do not know where most of the counselors are now serving, but these we have mentioned have affected lives in New Guinea, Alaska, Brazil, South Africa and Romania. I count it a tremendous privilege to have worked with these and other equally outstanding men and women who left their mark all over the world, as they took the Good News of salvation to remote areas. One of the thrills of Heaven will be to gather round the throne and see these faithful servants honored by our Lord!

During these delightful years at Tadmor, our girls attended a one-room schoolhouse, a mile and a half up Benton Creek. One evening Bernadine, returning from Wesco where she had visited Watson and Mary Thornton, drove by there just as night was falling. The schoolhouse had burned to the ground without anyone knowing it was on fire. When Bernadine told the girls about the fire, Margie burst into tears. Ruth Ann closed the book she was studying, and said,

“Goodie! I don’t have to finish this studying!” I was reminded of a classic song we used to sing at Chefoo when we went on our winter holiday:

No more Latin, no more French,
No more bending o’er the bench!
If the teacher interferes
Knock him down and box his ears!

Quite predictably, the day came when friction arose as various members of the fifteen-man Committee felt free to make demands, some of which we could not meet. We resigned, not knowing where the Lord would lead us. But it was with real joy that we looked back on four fruitful years at Camp Tadmor. I was indeed enjoying the waist-deep water and looked forward to the day when the Lord would enable me to swim in the deep water, serving Him. I’ve thought often of Chefoo days. As long as we were little kids in the Prep School we were never allowed out into the deeper water; but when we were big enough to learn to swim, the master would take us out in a boat into deep water, make us jump out, and then he would decide if we were good

enough as swimmers to be trusted in deep water. How much longer would the Lord keep me from the real fun of swimming in deep water? Did He have other lessons for me to learn first?

Years after we left Tadmor, I attended an IFCA Convention in Los Angeles. On the last night there, as I sat at a table with friends, a young man tapped me on the shoulder and said, “I just want you to know that I accepted the Lord at Camp Tadmor, and tomorrow morning I am sailing to the mission field!”

[go to next Chapter](#)