



Family Week

by Cherie Yurco



Family time is a precious commodity, and it's hard to find something the whole family can do together. For music lovers both young and old, traveling to music camp often means leaving loved ones behind. Wouldn't it be great to, instead, bring them along for the adventure?

The Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS) offers Family Weeks at three different camps -- Pinewoods near Plymouth, Massachusetts; Timber Ridge in West Virginia; and Ogontz in New Hampshire's White Mountains -- that provide a folk music vacation for the entire family.

"Family Week tends to draw people with a high level of interest in dancing or music making or both," says Mitzie Collins, 66, of Rochester, New York, who has attended Family Week for many years both as an instructor and as a participant.

It was thanks to Collins and other like-minded musicians that Family Week began. A hammered and mountain dulcimer teacher, Collins frequented adult camps organized by CDSS, and she and other musical parents found themselves saying, "Gosh, we're having such a good time. Wouldn't it be great if our kids could do this?"

They approached CDSS management, which was initially concerned about how kids could be integrated into a camp. But it was the 1970s and change was in the air. CDSS, and some interested campers, came up with a structure and Family Week was born.

Back then, Collins only wanted to share her love for music with her family. She had no idea how quickly Family Week would blossom into something truly extraordinary.

Sweetness and Loveliness

"At an adult camp you are a little bit self-focused, and at Family Week it's not just about you," says Nawal Motawi, 43, a tile artist from Ann Arbor, Michigan. "There's a sweetness and a loveliness to the people."

Motawi has attended Family Week for about five years, starting when her son, Kitson Dong, was three. "At Family Week we spend a lot of time together and I find I enjoy his company in another way," she says.

Kappy Laning, 51, serves as camp director at Timber Ridge and attends Family Week with a large blended family that includes her husband, Sam Droege, 49; her son, Stuart Hean, 16; two step-daughters, Anna, 14, and Wren, 15; their mom, Romey Pitman, 42; Pitman's husband, Brad Seay, 41; and Pitman and Seay's four-year-old daughter, Bizzy.

Laning, a pediatric nurse from Upper Marlboro, Maryland, first attended a CDSS camp at the suggestion of a friend. "My first camp I was pregnant with my son and I've been coming ever since," she recalls. "My son has grown up in this environment. He's an avid dancer and learning to play guitar."

Romey Pitman went to camp for the first time when Bizzy was two. "It was amazing how much fun I had," she says.

"I love dancing, the music that goes with it, and playing that music," says Pitman. "CDSS camp is a way to share my love of those things with my kids." Pitman's teenage daughters are both involved in music year

round. Wren plays tuba and flute and Anna plays clarinet and harmonica.

A Yearly Ritual

Those who have tried CDSS Family Week tend to come back year after year, as they watch their children grow and mature. Families are encouraged to bring whatever instruments they play and everything is organized around making each family member feel like they are part of the group.

Families eat together in a dining hall, often accompanied by live music. Each person is assigned a daily chore and they are requested to attend at least two daily gatherings.

Freelance radio producer Marika Partridge, 52, of Takoma Park, Maryland, says she has attended so many camps with her husband, portrait painter Larry Ravitz, 56; son Chaney, 17; and daughters Sally, 14; and Irene, 13; that she's lost count.

"My son is high functioning autistic with special needs, and when we went to our first camp I didn't know how he would fit in," Partridge recalls. "It's been really great for him and anytime that something is great for him, it's usually great for the rest of us."

Not only has Family Camp become a relaxing time for the whole family, it's helped Chaney discover his sense of rhythm. "Now, everyone in my family is a dancer," says Partridge. "My son plays piano and would like to learn drums. He has a pretty good sense of pitch and he's learning harmony, and the dancing reinforces that." Additionally, Partridge plays piano, tin whistle, and ukulele and her husband plays sax and flute. "My daughter Sally is really blossoming as a guitar player, and plays fiddle and accordion, and Irene is a piano player." The family packs a number of instruments for family week.

For children and adults alike, Family Week is a chance to perform in a friendly environment. "Kids have a chance to join the dance band," says Mitzie Collins. "That's often a real eureka moment because people dance along with their playing and they get to be functioning musicians in the community."

"It's great watching the kids bring their fiddle that they may have started at school and they try it out at camp and become part of the camper band," says Laning. "The next year they come back and they are even better on the instrument, or maybe another instrument."

A Sacred Retreat

Just as campers are encouraged to bring musical instruments they are discouraged from bringing electronic gadgets and video games. And there's no TV and Internet access in the cabins. "CDSS Family Camp is a kind of sacred retreat," explains Collins.

"We're modeling a much healthier way of living," says Partridge. And, although live music from jam sessions and dances can be heard all day long, there are plenty of other activities to keep families busy, such as swimming, canoeing, organized hikes, crafts, and even some built-in time to just read or relax.

"Some of the best times I've ever had were at camp," says Nawal Motawi. "The whole package is fun: being outdoors more than we ever are in our urban life and sharing music with other people."

Learning for Young and Old

Family Week is an educational experience for the entire family and daily classes, divided by age group, are held both in the morning and afternoon.

"All children are required to go to the classes and the teachers are top-notch and experienced," says Laning. "In all my years at the camp I've never had a child refuse to go. We always find a way for it to work out and everyone ends up having a great time."

For younger children classes begin at age two and focus on singing, movement, dancing, and crafts. From age eight and nine children begin to learn clogging, body rhythm, social dances, and longsword.

"It's brain gym; all the dances and movement patterns they are getting out of this are vital for the development of the brain," says Partridge. "The teachers watch the children and they know who needs extra help."

Ten to 12-year-olds sing, dance, and clash sticks together, while learning about music around the world. Adult classes, for age 13 and older, include contra, clog, and swing dance, longsword, family band for ages 10 and up, mummies, and harmony.

"It's great for grown-ups, as well as children," says Partridge, whose husband has early onset Parkinson's. "He's in good shape, but the dancing is great for him. It's healthy for all of us and uses all our faculties."

"A lot of times we send our kids off to do wonderful things, all the while they are thinking, 'If it's so

wonderful, why aren't the grownups doing it?' says Collins. "The kids see that this is important enough for grownups to do too. It also provides a wonderful model for doing things with their own families."

The camp is a particularly great experience for teenagers, who are treated as adults and learn social skills, alongside musical skills, which carry over into their home life. Collins stresses that this is especially useful as the teenage years are often the time when we "lose" our children.

"Kids don't get to talk to adults that much," she explains. "At camp they get an appreciation for other capable adults who are not critical of them and see them as separate people. That's particularly important for teens."

"My teenage daughter told me that it's the only place where she feels she can just completely be herself," says Romey Pitman. "They don't have to act cool and tough the way they do at school; they are full participants in the adult community. They play music and dance with the grownups, but they also play with the little kids and look out for them. All the ages are engaged in such a healthy way."

Total Immersion in Music

Each evening at 8:30 p.m. a guitarist leads all those children under age 10 to their cabins for bedtime. Once they are safely tucked in bed, parents are free to return to the dancing and live music, while roving babysitters monitor the children.

"It's a great vacation for a mom," says Partridge. "Live music, dancing, wholesome activities, really nice people, and the community is fantastic."

CDSS's staff of professional musicians and music teachers interact with camping families in every aspect of the camp, including bringing their own families along to camp.

"Music is integral to everything we do at camp," says Laning. "We are spoiled by the live music at camp. We appreciate the musicians who are performing and we are also inspired by them."

"You can join the band or just sit around and play," says Partridge. "If you are a younger player who wants to learn something new, the musicians always, always take time to do that."

She has fond memories of jamming poolside with Family Camp teacher David Cantieni, a flutist from the group Wild Asparagus. "I play the ukulele and he tells me what I could be doing to accompany him," says Partridge. "He's teaching me tunes and strums and I'm really coming along because of this informal work."

"There could be a craft project going on and nearby people are jamming," explains Collins. "So the kids are hearing music while they are doing other things. That's so valuable. There are lots of ways to teach music. You can teach it in a classroom, but people all over the world learn music more from just being around it. This is a more organic way."

"My favorite part is the multisensory nature of it," she adds. "You are in a pine woods, away from the world and yet you are immersed in music and dance. I go to a lot of different music festivals, but rarely am I so immersed."

Musical Legacy

Many of the adults who bring their children to Family Camp see it as a way of passing down the tradition of folk music and dancing. "This folk world is such a healthy world," says Laning. "At camp the children learn that it's a wonderful community and they have a tendency to either stick with it or stick close to it as they grow up."

"We were not thinking generationally back when Family Camp started, but we are definitely thinking generationally now," says Collins. "There are a lot of gray hairs in any cultural activity today. You tend to get a lot of people in their 40s and 50s, which is wonderful for them but doesn't address the next generation."

And Family Week's generational thinking seems to be working. "Any number of kids who went to the early camps are now back on staff, running camps, and having their own children attend," says Collins.

Collins and her husband do their part to pass the tradition of folk music to the next generation, they are now bringing their grandchildren to camp each summer. "We come with a slightly changing cast each year," says Collins. "We may have two or three generations."

"What's really neat for us, where our grandchildren are concerned, is that we get to be around them and learn a lot about them outside of ceremonial occasions," she says. "But yet they are not with us all the time."

"We have the best, silliest whole week," says Partridge. "We get to enjoy music, dancing, singing, and we even have a parade. We come home with songs stuck in our heads ... It's pure joy!"

For more information visit the country dance and song society website at www.cdss.org or view Making music's calendar of Music camps at makingmusicmag.com/calendar/camps.html.



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