

More than Just a Location

I am wearing a t-shirt, tucked in, of course, with a black belt, and dark green shorts that are way too big for me. I have on sandals, and my hair is pulled back in a ponytail. I haven't showered for days. I am wearing a whistle around my neck and my nametag is precisely pinned to my shirt. I stretch out my arms and try to quickly wake up- it is way too early in the morning. I slap a smile on my face as I see kids running towards me. I am a camp counselor at Rock Eagle 4-H Center- the largest 4-H center in the United States.

Located north of Eatonton, Georgia, the center is adjacent to the Oconee National Forest. It sits on 1428 acres of land, which includes a 110-acre lake, and has served nearly three million people during the last 49 years (Smith "Rock Eagle 4-H Center History"). As an active sixth grade 4-er, I attended the center for a weekend trip. Later, I attended a fellow camp on Jekyll Island. There, the counselors seemed to be having so much fun. They truly cared about me, and their enthusiasm was contagious. At this point, I just knew I had to be a 4-H camp counselor one day. My dream came true in January of 2003 when I received my acceptance letter and embarked on a journey that would affect my life tremendously.

I look around the camp today and notice the buildings that have made up the camp since it was opened in 1955. These buildings include cabins where campers stay, a dining hall, a canteen, a small chapel, an auditorium and other buildings that are facilities for such activities as classes and recreation. These other buildings are sponsored by companies like Georgia Power and Coca-Cola. The classes held in these buildings teach life skills to campers. For example, in Open Air Feast, campers learn how to cook pizza on a gas grill. The facility also includes a putt-putt course as well as tennis courts.

I think of the dream Bill Sutton, the State 4-H leader from 1942-1954 and “Founder of Rock Eagle” had that “one day we will have a 4-H center large enough to accommodate 1,000 young people” (qtd. in “Georgia 2002 Inductees”). His dream surely did come true on October 30, 1954 as 4-H members, supporters, UGA officials, and politicians gathered at Rock Eagle for its dedication. The dedication was broadcasted live on WSB radio (Smith “Southeast DPA”). The first week of camp was held in June of 1955 with 431 campers attending at a cost of \$8.41. They played, laughed, and attended classes such as “Tractor Operation and Maintenance” and “Looking in the Mirror,” a study in personal development (Adams).

Bill Sutton, like other leaders of 4-H, knew that 4-H was a club which produced the leaders of the future. What started out as a boys’ corn club by Professor G.C. Adams in 1904 is now one of the largest clubs in the world (“Georgia 2002 Inductees”). With its motto: To make the best better, 4-H members use the 4 H’s- head, heart, hands, and health to serve their country through leadership roles and service activities.

Bill Sutton is named the “Founder of Rock Eagle” because he was intensely interested in the development of a statewide 4-H center. In 1950, he heard that the

acreage at the Rock Eagle mound and lake was available. He flew to Washington to secure the federally-owned area ("Georgia 2002 Inductees"). His ability to be a "master fundraiser" was influential in the establishment of the Georgia 4-H Foundation which headed the project (Smith "Southeast DPA"). He was a 4-H member for 12 years and among other honors, served as the head of the National Extension Subcommittee on 4-H Work ("Georgia 2002 Inductees").

After eating a quick breakfast, which consisted of the famous Rock Eagle hard toast, I head to the auditorium to pick something up. As I walk in, I notice the table sitting in the lobby. I think of the 4-H supporters and employees of the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service who sat around this table 56 years ago to develop the Georgia 4-H Foundation to raise funds for the construction of a state 4-H center. I think of the 4-Hers and their determination to raise \$60,000 for the construction of the center by selling eggs and many other projects (Smith "Southeast DPA"). Lastly, I think of former Georgia governor and Senator Herman Talmadge whom the auditorium is named for because of his great contributions to the center as well as Georgia 4-H. Senator Talmadge agreed that for every private dollar the 4-H Foundation raised, he would match it with one state dollar ("History of Rock Eagle 4-H Center"). The auditorium, which is probably the nicest part of the center because of its large seating capacity, stage, and production capabilities, is the location of the camp's traditional variety show which counselors put on Wednesday nights for campers. Some acts go back as far as 1979, with the performance by the male counselors doing "Grease Lightning." The show is ended with what is called the "finale." In the finale, counselors perform songs rewritten from popular ones to coincide with the theme of camp.

After stopping by the auditorium, I head to my favorite part of the day- the time when I get to lead campers down the trail to the Rock Eagle effigy mound. The trail, which is about a mile and a half, gives way to the amazing history for the location of the center. My group reaches the granite stone tower, built in the 1930's by the Works Project Administration (WPA) and the University of Georgia (Smith "Southeast DPA").

I walk up the steps of the tower. I stand in awe, overlooking the eagle, which measures 102 feet from head to tail and 120 feet from wingtip to wingtip. The body rises to about ten feet above the surrounding ground's surface. It is constructed entirely of milky quartz rocks and boulders ranging in size from baseball sized to large basketball sized boulders ("Rock Eagle Mound"). The mound is actually shaped like a buzzard. Most of its history is still a mystery to us; however, we do know it was built almost 2,000 years ago by the Mississippian Indians (Estep). Jason Estep, a former 4-H counselor and Environmental Education staff member, seems to believe that it was built in the shape of a buzzard to accompany people who died. He believes that the deceased were placed on the rock buzzard and then real buzzards would come and carry the body away, symbolizing their journey to the heavens.

Because of its influence and historical background, the camp also takes up the Native American theme. It is divided into four tribes- three of which are names of Southeast Indians who once lived in the area. They are the Cherokees, Muskogees, and Shawnees. The camp's special interest program teaches campers about Southeast Native American culture. The three tribes all compete, by cleaning up their cabin and area and through sports competitions, to win the coveted tribal shield which is presented by the

fourth tribe, the Tribal Council. The Tribal Council is the only tribe without campers. It contains leadership counselors who are in charge of the jobs that run the camp.

As the day goes on, the temperature seems to rise. I laugh at a story my mother, Marie Warbington, a former Georgia 4-Her, told me of one of her Rock Eagle experiences back in 1968:

One weekend I visited Rock Eagle, and it was extremely hot.

A friend and I decided to walk to the canteen to get a soft drink.

One of the girls told us to pick her one up, too. By the time we got back to the cabin, the ice in her soft drink had already melted.

Rock Eagle has always been known to be hot; however, since its opening in 1955, it has appealed to those looking for a cool place. In fact, when the camp opened, it was one-of-a-kind because all of the cabins were equipped with the new technology of air conditioning. However, most campers at Rock Eagle have no interest in being cooped up all day in a cabin. So instead of cooling off inside, the campers can take a trip to the pool. Rock Eagle is equipped with an Olympic-size pool that was built in 1964. In 1988, a huge water slide was added to the pool, adding a more exciting element for campers (Smith "Southeast DPA").

As I blow my whistle to inform campers of where to go, I notice the pageant grounds. The pageant grounds include a hill that overlooks the lake. The children sit on the hill and on Thursday nights, counselors put on a pageant telling the legend of the Great Rock Eagle.

On my way to the recreation building, I pass the bottom office. This is the place where all the fiscal operations are done. What a change from what it used to be! In

1952, this building housed skilled prison inmates who were provided by former Senator Talmadge to construct the facility ("History of Rock Eagle 4-H Center"). In fact, when the center opened for camp in 1955, the prisoners remained onsite and worked on the camp while the counselors ran camp for fifth and sixth grade 4-Hers (Smith "Southeast DPA").

I look down at my watch and see that I only have a few more hours today to play with these wonderful children who have touched my life in such a way. I hurry to my next destination, keeping in mind all that this camp's history means to me.

It has been almost a year since my first summer at Rock Eagle. In that summer, I learned that the history of Rock Eagle is not just simply pure facts, but it is also the hands and hard work that went into the building of a place that provides memories that its keepers can never forget. To me, Rock Eagle is more than just a location on a map. Rather, Rock Eagle represents a certain place in my life.

For me, Rock Eagle is where I became myself. It was my first time away from home for a long period of time. I was out of my comfort zone. I grew up in a small town and school where everyone knew your name. Here at camp, the only people I knew were simply acquaintances. They knew nothing about my family, or the trouble I got into as a ninth grader, or how when I was five I colored on the church walls with a permanent marker. For me, camp was a place where I could start over and through that, I was able to shed a protective layer that I had held onto for so long and become myself.

The people I met last summer have become my best friends. I lived with them, cheered with them, cried with them, and mostly laughed with them. I am forever

changed by the way they touched my heart. They were people from all different types of backgrounds and ethnicities- each bringing their own part of themselves into the program.

My leadership counselors provided me with strength on days of discouragement and encouragement on days when they felt I did a good job. It felt good to have someone who you hardly knew actually care deeply about your health as well as your attitude. Because of their deep concern and interests in the lives of their counselors, I respected them in each and every way.

The second-year counselors were my role models for the summer. They gave me advice on what to do and lived by example. I looked up to them as experienced counselors and did everything they told me because I knew they would guide me in the right way.

My fellow first-years were my best friends. They were my partners during the summer. I was able to grow close to people I would have never thought I would have liked before. The bonds I made with them are unchanging. They will forever remain in my heart.

Not only was my definition of friendship changed, but I was stretched in many ways. There were days where my legs felt like rocks, and I almost had to pry my eyes open with a wrench. When I would wake up, I felt there was no way to pull a smile out of my grouchy face. Then the simple voice of a child would bring me back to life. Their charisma and innocence was my fuel. As I worked with children of all different backgrounds, it was then that I felt my true calling was to teach.

My job was to love the children last summer, yet at times I felt guilty, feeling as if I was enjoying myself way too much for this to actually be a job. The lessons that children who were age ten gave me were ones that I could never learn cutting grass in a subdivision or being a hostess at a restaurant. Their pure excitement for life influenced my desire to be a more positive person. Their energy and ability to be themselves made my job worthwhile.

I remember a boy named Chris. On the first night of camp, he came up and hissed at me. At first I thought to myself, "This boy is kind of weird." He kept hissing at me, so I started to play along and hissed back at him. He made it a game and every time I saw him during the week, he would hiss at me. He started to follow me around and he even told one person that I was "pretty cool." Coming from a 10 year old boy, I would call this a compliment, however it showed me that every child is different and expresses his or herself in different ways.

As I go into my second summer, I realize that a place cannot always stay the same, but rather it changes with people, time, and experience, just as the center has changed throughout the years. I am reminded of a quote by an anonymous writer that I believe sums up who I am in this place- "You never really leave a place you love...some of it you take with you and the rest you leave behind with memories that will last a lifetime."

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