

HISTORY OF INGERSOLL SCOUT RESERVATION AND SCOUT OFFICE

By: Dale Roberts

When my father first came to Peoria in the fall of 1957 he immediately noticed two glaring needs that the Creve Coeur Council had: first, their offices were totally inadequate. Second, their primary camp, Camp Wokanda, was small, out of date, and far too "civilized" to give Scouts a challenging camp experience. It had no lake or immediate river access and most of the facility dated back to the 1920's or 1930's. The other glaring fault that Camp Wokanda had was its proximity to the city and the Mossville Caterpillar plant. He believed it would only be a matter of time before one or the other would close in on them. Land wasn't getting any cheaper, so despite resistance from scouters who loved the old camp, Pop began pushing for the building of a new one.

He envisioned a Wilderness Camp where boys' camping and survival skills would truly be tested. It should be far enough away from town that it would be a little isolated and yet close enough to be reached in less than an hour so daily and weekend usage would be practical. He wanted the camp to have a lake for fishing, swimming, and boating, access to a creek or river for canoe trips, and enough land that campsites had some semblance of privacy and community within themselves. He also hoped that it could be "wild" enough that deer and other animals could roam freely.

By the early 1960's Pop had finally convinced the board that it was time to move forward with the purchase of land and construction of a camp. Several sites were considered, but they eventually centered their efforts around a large tract of land about 36 miles out Rte. 116, west of London Mills. I'm not sure about this, but I believe the land was known to an old Scouter by the name of Bill Lytell of London Mills who was aware that the council was looking for land to build a new camp. The land's rolling hills, valleys, and extensive natural woodlands were made even more attractive by the fact that Cedar Creek, which fed into the Spoon River of Edgar Lee Masters' fame, ran right through the property.

Parts of the land had been farmed for many years, but the vast majority of the roughly 600 acres was truly a "wilderness." Not only was wildlife plentiful, there was even a large den of beavers who consistently built dams on Cedar Creek. There was also an added bonus. Far down the property near the Cedar Creek was a very nice brick and stone ranch house that was only about 5-10 years old at the time. It had been built by a rather eccentric but skilled craftsman and had two fireplaces, cedar closets, a beautiful modern built-in kitchen, and a full basement. Unfortunately the builder also had a real penchant for isolation so the house was far from the highway with no neighbors within miles. My father told me at the time that the owner's wife had grown despondent over the isolation in which she lived and committed suicide in the house. That was one of the reasons the property was for sale; the owner was anxious to move away from unhappy memories of the place.

Despite that one negative element, it was decided that this was the place that the camp should be.

The next hurdle, of course, was financing. Where would they find the money to purchase the land, build the necessary buildings and roads, and, most importantly, construct a dam to create a lake suitable for waterfront activities.

Even at the bargain asking price of \$100 per acre, the cost to acquire the initial 600 acres was \$60,000, a fairly large sum in 1962. Though fund raising campaigns were considered, Pop really set his sights on finding an "angel": one donor capable of buying the entire parcel at once so they could own the land free and clear before beginning the improvements.

In late 1962, he began to hear about an elderly gentleman in the Canton area named William Parlin Ingersoll. In his mid-70's at the time, he lived in a gracious three-story home on the eastern edge of Canton and had an almost mystical reputation around the town. He was sort of a local "Howard Hughes type": adventurous, a bit reclusive, and very wealthy. Everyone in town knew who he was, but he was often suspicious that people were only after his money, so he generally maintained a fairly low profile.

He was the only child and last surviving heir of two of Canton's most prominent families. On his father's side, the Ingersolls had made their money by owning most of the utilities in the Canton area. His mother, Alice Parlin, was the heiress to the Parlin Plow Company, which eventually became part of International Harvester. Civic-minded and philanthropic, the Ingersoll family put a lot back into the community of Canton, endowing the local airport, parks, and the high school gymnasium.

Ingersoll never married, but had a housekeeper named Ann Hollandsworth who I believe was his cousin. I believe she was also a former nurse. Whatever their relationship, she was a constant presence in the household on the occasions I was there and she always alluded to knowing far more than she told. (More about that a bit later; I'm getting ahead of myself.)

Pop was introduced to Mr. Ingersoll by a mutual acquaintance named Russ Plank. He was aware of both the Council's camp building project... and that Mr. Ingersoll had the ability to help. Apparently Mr. Plank and Mr. Ingersoll had been friends for years and frequently spoke over short-wave radio. Ingersoll piloted his own plane and loved excursions to the north woods.

My father first approached Mr. Ingersoll in early 1963 when he presented him with "the opportunity to participate" in the building of a Wilderness Camp for Boy Scouts to enjoy. Ingersoll listened patiently and quietly, then told Pop he'd need some time to think it over and that he'd get back to him.

I have the letter that William P. Ingersoll sent to my father on February 13, 1963, stating that he was indeed interested in the Scout work he was doing, but that he was frustrated by being unable to obtain some personal information he was looking for. Pop wondered what he could possibly mean, but he was later told by their mutual friend that Ingersoll was having him "checked out" to be certain that his caused was legitimate and that he was personally an honorable man. Ingersoll was no fool and he wasn't about to hand over \$60,000 to a virtual stranger without making sure he was not a con man.

Apparently he was satisfied with the information he obtained because one day in the early spring of 1963, Pop received a phone call at his office from William P. Ingersoll that he had mailed a check to him that day for the full \$60,000 Pop had asked for! Just to put it in perspective, that amount was the equivalent of five years of Pop's salary at the time.

The gift carried one stipulation: that Ingersoll be allowed to remain completely anonymous. He was also made a point of telling Pop that the camp might be the recipient of additional future donations, but if he ever heard that his name had become public knowledge, all future donations would immediately cease. He wasn't kidding! Therefore, a very small number ever knew in those early years who the mystery donor was.

I have great memories of traveling with my Pop to Canton each year on a Saturday afternoon near Christmas to take Mr. Ingersoll and Ann a plate of my mother's homemade Christmas cookies and a small gift such as a miniature orange tree. I loved riding up the long avenue of trees and especially going around the circular drive to his front door. We were always welcomed warmly and I was fascinated by the gracious old house which had a private "phone booth" off the hall, a butler's pantry, and a chair that glided up and down the stairway. It was like stepping back in time about 30 years. I'm sure the house was built early in the 20th century and had never been modernized much, but it was full of beautiful antiques and the finest of everything. Our visit never lasted very long, but on our departure we would always be given a bag of home-grown popcorn from their field which their caretaker had harvested and perhaps a loaf of persimmon bread baked by Ann. A car buff since early childhood, I especially enjoyed visiting his garage and sitting in his big Mercedes-Benz 600 SEL, a car he said he drove because it got much better gas mileage than the big Chryslers he'd driven for years!

I committed a real "faux pas" once when I said I was waiting for him to get a Rolls-Royce, simply because I'd never seen one up close. He got a little indignant and stated that he could never afford such an extravagance. I could tell by my father's expression that I'd said something I shouldn't have. On the way home he gently pointed out that Mr. Ingersoll was a modest man who really disliked being thought of as being "rich."

Once the land was purchased, they tackled the task of building a 17 acre lake, roads, and the few buildings that would be absolutely necessary to make a functional camp. The first building to go up was actually a donation from Caterpillar Tractor Company and was a large shed moved from another location. It was placed on a foundation and made into the camp commissary as a supply building and trading post for the troops that would come to camp.

The second building was a four room log house donated by the widow of a Colonel Dr Charles De Revey. Mrs. De Revey wanted a monument to her husband, who by some accounts was actually a bit of a rogue. His titles of "Colonel" and "Dr" were allegedly of somewhat dubious origin. It was known as the DeRevey Health Lodge and it was designed to be the camp infirmary, with a large living room with a stone fireplace, kitchen, bath, and two bedrooms. The cost at the time was \$15,000 and I remember Pop actually feeling that it was a bit too grand for its purpose or setting, but Mrs. DeRevey was most insistent that it be as nice as possible. I especially appreciated its niceness on several occasions. Pop used to love to take me down to camp for

overnights with him. I was a less than enthusiastic camper, and the construction of the health lodge meant that we had a comfortable place to stay, especially when the weather turned foul.

Though I never cared much for fishing, some of my favorite childhood memories are of fishing with my Pop at dusk on the camp lake. Time spent on the lake was especially meaningful to us after January 1965 when it was announced that it would be called Lake Roberts in honor of Pop's 25th anniversary in professional Scouting. I have the original bronze plaque which was placed at the top of the dam. The one now there replaced it after the original was stolen and later found. Obviously they didn't need two, so Pop took the spare home. I came across it in his basement workshop when my mother sold our family home five years after Pop's death in 1994 at age 81. It now hangs in my office.

After dark we would sit in front of the open fire in that cabin with no other light in the room and he would tell me the stories of his life. Since he was born in 1913 and was 41 when I was born, the years of his growing up sounded like a far-away world to me. He had come to America as a small child from England, and had lost his father and older brother to tuberculosis when he was 14. The surviving family subsequently lost their home. He survived the Depression, worked his way through the University of Wisconsin, married my mother in 1942, and served in World War II before resuming his Scouting career in South Bend, Indiana in 1946. They were introduced by one of his summer camp staff, Jim Hostetter, who was dating my mother's sister and later became my favorite uncle.

Most of the initial building was done from 1963-1966 when the camp was officially dedicated. By the dedication day the camp also included an administration office, housing for summer staff and a shower house. Each camp site had its own latrine and running water, but the camping was primitive. Troops prepared all their own meals from food delivered by the commissary.

The first full time ranger was hired during those years and he turned out to be a real character. He'd lost an arm early in life and had a prosthetic device that he could use to operate a chain saw, roll and smoke a cigarette, and drive the camp Jeep with it clamped to the wheel. He and his wife lived in the ranch house until it became evident that he had a serious drinking problem. He became somewhat violent, took a few potshots with his rifle and was quickly dismissed.

It was decided that part of the problem in attracting a qualified individual was the living situation. The ranch house was too far from the entrance to be practical for monitoring who was coming into and out of the property, so it was decided to move the house across the fields to where it stands today at the entrance gate. The gate was constructed in 1976 as a memorial to my brother, Doug, who had spent a summer on the camp staff in 1966 and died suddenly in 1975.

Throughout the mid to late 1960's Mr. Ingersoll frequently sent checks for various amounts of money that were never expected, but always welcome. Over the next several years, they were able to purchase adjoining property until they owned 1,000 acres and deemed the camp completed. During those years Pop and Mr. Ingersoll became good friends. As his health declined, Mr. Ingersoll became increasingly reclusive and few were allowed in to see him. My father was one of those few and when he would visit they would sit in comfortable silence for an hour, exchanging few words but enjoying being in each other's presence.

In the fall of 1972 William P Ingersoll passed away. His entire \$13 million estate went into a trust at First National Bank of Chicago, the terms of which were that the principal was never to be distributed. The interest was to provide income to the organizations he cared about.

I remember how elated my father was when he learned that the camp was to be the beneficiary of 13% of the annual interest off that \$13 million trust, which conservatively gave the camp an income in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year range. That was something which always made my father very proud: knowing that he'd been a part of creating something so significant that would be a lasting legacy.

Following Ingersoll's death, Pop approached Ann Hollandsworth and asked how she thought he would feel about having the camp renamed in his honor. She thought that he would like that very much, so in 1973 the Wilderness Camp was officially renamed Ingersoll Scout Reservation. The consistent income has allowed for substantial improvements over the years including the addition of a dining hall and swimming pool, boat house and whatever maintenance has been necessary.

The story of the Scout Service Center was somewhat simpler, but still bears telling.

When Pop arrived in 1957, the office was a second-floor walk-up above the corner of Main and Monroe Streets in the old Fern Building. It was run-down, dirty, had no elevator, no parking, and no presence on the street beyond a door with small lettering. It also had no ability to serve retail customers, so Pop decided that a new office would be the second big project he would tackle.

With the building of the Wilderness Camp he was spread rather thin, but by the early 1960's he knew something had to be done since the city had voted (by ONE VOTE in a city-wide referendum) to build a new public library on the site of the current Scout office.

His chosen site for the new office was 614 NE Madison. He liked its proximity to downtown and felt that the presence of the Roman Catholic cathedral spires across the street would make it easy to find and keep the neighborhood from declining too quickly around them.

At the time the land was occupied by a huge old Victorian house that had been a grand single family home but had been divided into one and two room apartments for poor senior citizens. During the couple years the Council owned the building while preparing to build Pop tried his best to be a good landlord to the elderly who lived there. Again, I have nice memories of going with him to take them baskets of fruit and boxes of candy at Christmas. They were so grateful; Pop was such a contrast to the previous owner who seemed to care little about them as people. It was one of the first glimpses I'd ever had of that particular kind of poverty and I've never forgotten my Pop's example. He truly tried to live the Scout Law.

A driving force behind construction of the new office was a local insurance broker named Ed Martin. I have memories of his sitting at the 1966 dedication: frail, in failing health and crying over having the building dedicated in his honor. It was also one of Pop's goals to see that the building's mortgage was paid off before he retired in 1977, another goal he accomplished long before that date. Fiscal responsibility was very important to him. He also had the ability to attract

leaders of high caliber to his Executive Board. To read the list of Council presidents during his tenure is like reading a "who's Who" of the Peoria business community during those two decades.

The new building was his pride and joy. He wanted it to have ample parking and space for training and Council functions. He was also proud of the fact that it held a Council store where scouters could come to purchase the supplies they needed. It was pretty much "state of the art" at the time and it still seems very functional. Even so, Pop often had his "own way" of doing things that often seemed a little strange. One in particular was the air conditioning system had an outdoor switch. Since the unit was enclosed in a locked chain-link fence, he kept a long stick on the ground close by to reach in and turn it on and off by his own version of "remote control"!

The neighborhood wasn't without its challenges even then, but it seems to have held up well considering that it's now going on 40 years since ground was broken.

One of our favorite family stories was the night Pop came home indignant that he found a guy painting his car and dripping light blue paint all over the freshly black-topped parking lot! The guy complimented him on the nice lot and told him how much he was enjoying having it as a place to work on his car. Only somebody who knew my Pop well can appreciate how funny he could be, and how dry his humor. He was just so incredulous at this guy's audacity. We all still chuckle whenever the story comes up some 35 years later.

I still feel a sense of pride whenever I'm in Peoria and pass by the Scout office. I also had the pleasure several years ago of taking my wife and son to see Lake Roberts at Ingersoll Scout Reservation and am very proud of the legacy my father left to the council.

The End