

The Origins of Moosehearts' Camp Ross

Seven spring-fed brooks meet near the southern limits of Mt. Morris Township in Illinois to form Pine Creek. This stream twists in a letter S for about a mile through the valley of Mooseheart Camp Ross. It was 1849 that Hitt and Coffman, two pioneer colonists from Washington County, Maryland, built a grist mill on Pine Creek in what is now the camp area. The water backed up to form lakes on either side of the ridge around which it curved, where now the camper's cabins, the director's cabin and the mess and recreation lodge are located.

In spite of general deterioration, the old mill area and the grassy vale around it became a favorite picnic spot for a generation of Mt. Morris youth. In the early 1900's they walked the two miles or more from the village, and groups of their elders drove out with their horse and buggy outfits. Automobiles later covered the distance more easily and it was at a family picnic in the mid 30's that Harold Ross stood on the remnant of the dam and said, "I would give ten years of my life to own this place!"

In 1937, they were informed the old mill property of about 75 acres was available to settle the estate. In November of that year, the Rosses' held their first picnic on their newly acquired land and the first business of the new owners was to clean up the area and make part of it available for their use which included considerable business entertaining as well as family recreation.

The "pavilion" at the point of the camping area, was formerly the loft of a barn across the creek. It was dismantled and moved to its present site the last week in March, 1939, to be used for a picnic shelter. Its construction is most interesting in that its beams are mortised and crosspieces held with wooden pegs. The place was used by practically every civic and religious group in Mount Morris, by labor and by management, farmers and fraternal organizations, and also by the owners, frequently after they had mowed, pruned, repaired and cleaned up from the previous users.

The group of three buildings by the dam stands in the quarry from which the materials for the dam were taken. The cabin referred to a shack under lease, was originally the property of the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, when the Rosses' finally obtained possession and tore out the interior, they found above the ceiling, sheets with holes for eyes and notes of men and horses and ceremonial spears and lances. Most of the reconstruction of the Ross cabin was done by Harold Ross, no carpenter, and it is not surprising that it took him about three years. The portion of the old dam which still stands with its tiers of quarried rock in steps is now the stadium from which the campers face the camp fire for sings and marshmallow roasts.

By 1957, some twenty years had passed since the Rosses' took possession of what had become some of the most beautiful acreage in Northern Illinois. The Ross boys grew up, married and all settled in the New England states. How best to use or dispose of the Ross Farm property became a problem and the consensus was that they would rather give it away than have someone obtain it at a bargain. It came as an inspiration one day that maybe the Loyal Order of Moose could use it in their program for the children at Mooseheart. Strong ties of friendship, business and fraternal feelings had long existed with the Order, particularly with Mooseheart, and it was hoped that the location, conveniently near the Child City, yet far enough away to give the atmosphere of an outing, might make it desirable for summer camping. Harold Ross was a sales executive for the printing firm that printed Moose Magazine -- and was a devoted Moose, a member of Mt. Morris Lodge 1551.

Negotiations were started with the Supreme Lodge and the final result was the conveyance of the property as a gift, in six parcels, one each year from 1956 through 1961, and its adaptation through the efforts of the Legion of the Moose, the Alumni Association of Mooseheart, and the Supreme Lodge of the Order, into one of the most beautiful children's camps existing. Utilities including heavy wiring and the well which is approximately seven hundred feet deep, were put in by the Supreme Lodge, the combination mess and recreation hall was the gift of the Alumni Association, and the further development was a project of the Legion of the Moose. By June 1960, thanks to \$100,000 invested by the Moose Legion and three years of work by Mooseheart staff and students, the camp was ready for dedication -- as part of that year's International Convention. Nearly 2,000 members made the long trek from Chicago to Mt. Morris. Involvement by the Moose Legion continues to this day, along with rock-solid support from the Mooseheart Alumni Association. "The Moose Legion has been a blessing for the kids at Mooseheart and their sanctuary at Camp Ross," Mooseheart Executive Director Scott Hart said. "Time and again when the Legion has been asked to step up and modernize Camp Ross, they have."

The camp has increased in acreage and beauty through two accessions. The land for the impressive entrance was donated by Mrs Lilian Eager of Rockford, in accordance with the wish of her husband who died very suddenly after stating his desire to donate it. The site of the present "winter cabin", centered between the camp property and the entrance gift, was owned by a member of the Mount Morris Moose Lodge 1551, who sold it to the Order. A few additional acres were obtained along the west boundaries and altogether the camp area is now about ninety-five acres.

The Camp Ross journey continues today. The vision of Harold Ross, as he stoutly maintained that “When God made the area of Mooseheart Camp Ross, He designed it for a children's camp under His special protection”.

This information provided here are extracts of information researched, compiled and written by Dorothy (Mrs Harold D.) Ross, 1967. Many Thanks to the Mt. Morris Moose Family Center #1551, the original article in its entirety can be viewed at <http://moose1551.com> .