



A personal reflection by Willis Ryan Henton, First Bishop of Western Louisiana, Retired

For the 1996 convention of the Diocese of Western Louisiana held at Good Shepherd, Lake Charles, Mr. Ron Roberts of St. Marks, Shreveport, put together an evening program on Camp Hardtner in anticipation of a Capital Fund Drive for an expansion of the Camp and Conference Center at Hardtner. I was asked to give a brief history of the camping program in the years since the excellent history written by Bishop Girault Jones, covering the years from its opening in 1948 to the year 1971.

At the end of the evening program on the Camp and Conference programs at Camp Hardtner, I was asked by several persons, including Judge Tom Yeager of St. James, Alexandria, to put my history down in an expanded paper. I told Judge Yeager I would and I am responding to a reminder from him to do so!

Bishop Jones's ends with a story of my appointment as the Archdeacon for Education, and the attention I gave to the Camp and its program. It was in those years of the mid-sixties, when I was an Archdeacon, that many changes were made in the camping program.

I decided I would write this in an anecdotal form, without trying to dig out materials and search for names. It will be a story. I am hoping it will prompt others who love Hardtner to respond with their camping stories so that we can add a supplement to this anecdotal history.

I came to the "undivided diocese" of Louisiana in 1958 after mission work in the Philippines, and I was on the staff of a lower-age camp in 1959. Soon I was the Dean of Junior High Camp for several years. It was a period of much camping in the United States and the models were much the same - a good bit of regimentation, with a big emphasis on recreation, sports, swimming and competition. For urban children, it was wonderful to be out-of-doors, and for all children to be away from home and to have relationships with many their age. Most camps had themes and our themes were Christian ones, with regular worship. The clergy designed programs which some considered to be "Sunday School" in the wood; others saw the opportunity for good clergy-camper relationships and had themes along the line of getting along with others and knowing the church.

Some of the theme "feed-ins" were not much remembered. There was a rumor that a previous camp for junior campers had their learning sessions on "Gelosian Sacreamentary," which was a liturgical manual of the early church. But much good resulted - the life enjoyed in the out-of-doors, close peer friendships, getting to know clergy and always, a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the Eucharist, celebrated first in an outdoor chapel and later in the lovely chapel which was a gift of members of the Hardtner Family. There were many gifted clergy and laymen and women who gave their time gladly in the camping program. Fathers Robert Ratell, Harold Bott, and Richard Wilson are clergy who come to mind; and also Youth Commission clergy members, Fathers Robert Dodwell and David Comegys.

Past campers often spoke to me of how they learned so much about the Eucharist and the church and chapel talks; and they all enjoyed chapel.

But there were things that bothered me about the camping program. The individual camps were too large for our facilities. This necessitated too many rules and much regimentation. The clergy and adult lay leaders would end a session exhausted. I remembered a vestry member questioning me if I really needed all of my vacation time, since supply clergy were not often available and I had had all that "restful time" at Camp Hardtner!

One great drawback in the program was the use of recent high school graduates as cabin counselors. They were not enough separated in age and experience to lead with positive cabin life. They usually knew nothing about age characteristics.

The biggest problem to me was a rainy day because there were too many young people for good programming in the pavilion. I tried, for instance, to avoid dances in my junior high campers. The girls were almost always more mature than the boys. They wanted dances and the boys generally did not. But rain for most of one camp session drove me to my wits end. I proclaimed an evening dance. The girls disappeared and emerged with big round curlers in their hair, looking like people from another planet. The boys did not want to bathe, insisting they were already clean from swimming.

But all in all, with good clergy leadership, a wonderful time in the out-of-doors and many new friendships, most campers went home happy and came back next year.

I must say here a word about Bishop Iveson B. Noland. He was always there for the staff and the campers. He gave the program great support, by appearing for at least one day at every camp during the summer session.

When I became Archdeacon and was given large responsibility for Camp Hardtner by Bishops Jones and Noland, I became aware that the post-camp evaluations that were required began to produce some eagerness to see if we could improve the program designs. A group of young clergy - called by Bishop Noland as "the Young Turks," was

called upon to think about the program "theologically!" The group included Earnest Bel, Urban Holmes, Bob Dodwell, Jim Reed, Bob Cooper, and later, Miller Armstrong, and yours truly.

We began with some Anglican characteristics of community: to love the created world and its children, of living with little necessary law but with much "grace;" and keeping in mind that all free people need "space!" We ended with a very simple formula - we would endeavor to have a design where all youth could experience "Christian community" and consider the camping area "their space."

Also heavily involved in the work in this design and its practical working aspects was the designated head of the Camp Hardtner Commission, which was part of the Department of Christian Education. For many years this was a parish priest, the Reverend Thomas Wade, who understood and appreciated the new design. Again the program that "came to be" had the full support of Bishop Iveson Noland.

And now for the "shifting of gears" that took place from the "think tanks" of the "Young Turks:"

The size of camps was reduced. Two sessions for some age groups took care of the numbers who wanted to come. Unfortunately this meant giving up two small camps - Choir Camp and Family Camp.

A move to use only clergy who enjoyed doing camps. Deans were chosen by the Hardtner Commission.

Clergy themes were chosen by the group chosen for each camp session, but met with the Training Camp which proceeded each session, with special emphasis on presenting the themes to the counselors.

A major change was getting college students, with at least one year behind them for counselors. To attract the best, they were paid a salary - and, indeed, many needed some paying work in the summer to come on staff.

Lay adults were chosen to work with clergy groups. some of these would continue on into adult life as deans of camping sessions. One such person was Ron Roberts of St. Marks, Shreveport, who became not only an able Dean but a member of the Training Camp.

The Training Camp for counselors was lengthened to the time of the camp. They met with the clergy groups for part of the time so they would be able to continue the camp theme in cabin time. Counselors were encouraged to be more than "order" keepers in the cabins, but teachers and friends. They were encouraged to talk about

being a Christian in sharing life experiences as counselors and friends, and always to be good examples.

Persons with other experiences in camping were brought aboard early on. This had success and failures. The "family type" design of our program was foreign to some. Others, after catching the vision of Hardtner as "a forming Christian community" loved it and stayed. Mary Dodwell was so thwarted by the change from her experience in previous camping that she wished to leave but stayed out of duty, and caught the Hardtner dream. At the diocesan convention in Lake Charles, she was honored for thirty years of service to Camp Hardtner. However, one highly recommended man in the new design left us one week in the first camp period.

Many of us involved in the camping program went to regional and national training programs. Those who came back realized they had been taught too many creative things to do, that campers should be doing. For instance, the first "design" camp had to give up time it took to make creative paper mats and napkins for use in the dining hall - an idea to help make dining more "dignified."

I took my training at an Ecumenical camp at Glen Rose, Texas with camping people from various church organizations in dioceses and districts - Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian and Lutherans, as I recall. There was a camping faculty member from a Department of Camping at the University of southern Illinois. The Presbyterian camp at Glen Rose had a wonderful rural site on the Brazos River. There was a central lodge, but we were encouraged to camp out for days at a time. I not only learned additional skills about cooking, but a great deal about the bonding that can take place out in the woods, sharing camp duties and sharing ideas about life! I learned to cope with a woman who had a bitter tongue and was critical of most of our views! It was a good lesson. I stopped thinking of how I wanted to throw her into the Brazos River to throwing a lot of humor at her. It worked for both of us.

It was there that I learned to use the natural environment for Indian games - lying on our backs and listening to the music of the cottonwood leaves in the wind, and telling stories based on the shape of the lovely cumulus clouds.

A wonderful change took place that greatly helped our camping sessions. Father Jim Theus suggested to me Joe Bordelon as a Camp Manager to replace our retiring manager who did not care for youth as far as I could tell. Joe and his lovely wife, Grace, came and loved being there and made the camp a happy place to be. The first camping summer session with the new, relaxed, family like design was a near disaster. It was too loose! Too much free time! Too much staff "creativity" - such as the designing of mats for the meal. Our program director quit, so Mary Dodwell and I tightened things up. A little structure tightening gave basic discipline; the counselors performed well and understood their leadership roles in follow-up on clergy themes and in being pastors and true counselors in the cabins. The campers loved it all. They

enjoyed their college counselors! Bonding took place that has lasted for years. Campers felt that Hardtner was "their space," especially those in high school. We all felt closer to each other. The Hardtner "magic" was working.

There was much greater use of the camp site in the area woods. The Hardtner Family gave us permission to camp and hike in their woods next to the camp. We did camping out and for some years had a pioneer camp in the woods led by Father Miller Armstrong and Mary Dodwell.

The First time the planning staff took to the woods for an overnight stay was traumatic to some. One priest refused to go. Father Dodwell was not at all enthusiastic. We had planned not to go out if it rained and when a small cloud appeared, came a flash of lightning; Father Dodwell fell to his knees and called on all to pray for rain. It didn't rain!

On the first camping overnight with counselors, Bishop Noland came with us and celebrated the Eucharist in the woods - very moving for us all. he knew the tracks of an early satellite and would catch its orbit of the Earth for all of us to see. One of the greatest assets of the camping program has been a rich harvest of priests. My first ordination in the new diocese as its First Bishop was to make two former campers Deacons - Keith Milligan and Hal Hutchinson. My last ordination before retiring was to ordain a former camper and staff person a priest, Father Michael Adams.

I had over nine years away from Camp Hardtner as Bishop of Northeast Texas. I gave a lot of time to their camp program. We lived in dorms out on a prairie site and camp sessions were smaller in number and so it was more relaxed. I removed all clergy who didn't want to help with camp as all clergy had been forced to serve before. It greatly improved the atmosphere and we did change to paid college age counselors and a training camp. The Senior Camp spent two days and nights in a cottonwood grove on the Canadian River - on land owned by an Episcopalian rancher. The "Hardtner magic" worked again.

I need to say that the change in design in the Camp Hardtner program was not welcomed by all. There was considerable resistance by some clergy. But we "stayed the course." When I returned from Texas as the First Bishop of the Diocese of Western Louisiana, I found the design hammered out in the sixties was going strong. The dedication of the clergy and staff was outstanding. The training camps were excellent -with many improvements. I felt right at home. I went to all of the training camps and talked about the Hardtner model, and then visited all camps, if only for a day.

I confess to loving Camp Hardtner. The campers use to say that God lives at Camp Hardtner. It is certainly a sacred place to me and many others. This document is a testimony. It doubtless has minor mistake in it. Campers and staffs, being human, had problems arisen, of course, at times, but for many, the camping program blessed many and served our Lord well.

I have said little here about the use of the camp for conferences, retreats and so forth. The load was light in my early years here but much loved and appreciated by many who came. In my first year back here, I was asked to give leadership to a venture in mission drive, where the design was to give on-quarter of the funds raised to build a conference center at Hardtner. The drive was a great success - the goal of \$1,000,000 was met and \$400,000 extra dollars were received.

The Conference Center was built and I have never felt a greater honor than to have the Conference Center main building named Henton Hall.

The Conference Center has attracted many for conferences, retreats, Cursillo and parish and diocesan planning events. We moved clergy conferences and the Episcopal Church Women's Conference there. There is no question but with these moves and the continuing camping and youth activities there, Camp Hardtner has become a very important spiritual center of the diocese.

With much reflection of my retired years, I have come to be very concerned about one aspect of the success of programs, the camping program and the Conference Center programs.

It has to do with the success of the new design in camping that made it "their space," a spiritual place for the campers. I can see that there has been a slow switch to hardtner being largely an "adult space."

I urge all who love hardtner - the youth and the adults who are many, to give careful thought to how the new property and buildings will have design "space" for both the youths and the adults.

May God bless and keep Camp Hardtner!
Amen.