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Swan River Youth Forest Camp

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The Swan River Youth Forest Camp is a correctional institution for men, housing both juveniles and young adults. This unique camp, with a capacity for 50 residents, is located in the 39,000 acre Swan River State Forest in Northwest Montana. This forest is managed by the Montana Forestry Department, Department of Natural Resources. The Youth Camp staff are employed by the Correction Division of the Montana Department of Institutions. The young men from the Youth Camp provide the work force.

The crews work a 40 hour week with holidays and weekends free. The work program is very productive for Montana, however the guiding principle is the young man and his future instead of "production" for the State. The philosophy of teaching good work habits is judged more important than the dollar value of the work produced.

The Youth Camp residents do not remain in the program long enough to receive professional training in a skill or vocation; the average length of stay is approximately six months. The main thrust is developing good work habits and helping the youths realize their potential interests, and attitudes. After release, a training program will help them become productive members of society.

The work program revolves around work plans developed by state forestry technicians and professional foresters for state-owned forests. Timber management and forest stand improvement are done primarily through thinning. Each crew member learns about desirable species, proper spacing, healthy trees, insects, and release cuts. While they do not become professional foresters, they do learn practical forestry. Many crew members have sufficient qualifications to secure employment on federal or industrial thinning crews. Regeneration and brush disposal are also an important part of the work plan.

Fire Crews start training early in the year in order to be fully prepared for the fire season. The forestry work crew foremen know that an untrained crew member can be an unsafe worker and a potential danger to the crew. Each Youth Camp resident is given the opportunity to train for the "Hot-Shot" fire crews, and receive intensive instruction. Refresher courses are given throughout the fire season, and a rigorous physical fitness program is conducted prior to and during the fire season. The "Hot-Shot" crews are well trained, and are recognized as outstanding fire fighters.

All the carpentry work for the State Forestry system is done at the Swan River Youth Camp. Many residents receive valuable training and work experience. A few become proficient and seek employment in carpentry trades; others receive trade-school training after release in order to attain journeyman status. This program turns out thousands of items each year; three years ago two fire towers (complete with cabins) were built for use on state-owned forests.

A mechanics program has been added during the last three years. The shop has been gradually improved and is presently capable of doing major engine overhauls and rebuilding worn-out vehicles. The State Forestry Department is eligible to receive GSA excess and military surplus equipment and machines. Many fire-fighting units and other equipment are rebuilt and are being used today throughout the state system. Work crews receive training and experience in all areas of mechanics and repair. Although it is impossible for them to receive enough training to become skilled mechanics, many of them discover an aptitude and enter Vocational-Technical school after they are released.

Other areas of the work program include road and trail maintenance, as well as bridge repair and maintenance. The state-owned camp-

Youth Camp living quarters.
One project of special interest is the Conservation Braille Trail at the Montana School of the Deaf and Blind at Great Falls. This special project has been designed by interested State Forestry personnel, and the work is done by the Youth Camp crews. Each spring a special crew of boys goes to Great Falls to plant trees and to expand this conservation program.

Each crew member is observed as he works, and receives a daily score in safety, effort, conduct, and production. This grade is used as a means of evaluating progress and performance and to determine overall performance of the Youth Camp program. The counselors or social workers use these evaluations in developing release plans; such plans may include employment or further training in an area in which the young man has demonstrated interest and aptitude.

The corrections division counseling and social work program is conducted during late afternoon and evening hours. Individual case work and group therapy is done after the evening meal, and may continue late into the night. Social workers wear “many hats” in addition to being counselors they are also disciplinarian, recreation leader, supervisor, advocate, confidant, and good friend.

The staff at the Swan River Youth Camp do many things, but the most important contribution is their ability to give LOVE. The young residents respond to this and quickly realize that the camp staff is genuinely concerned about them. This positive relationship is essential to rehabilitation. Counseling is designed around improving each resident’s self-image. Each social worker is knowledgeable in transactional analysis and facilitative counseling, as well as reality therapy and other counseling programs. The Youth Camp Staff is not locked into one type of program; the counseling program can be described as “Relationship-Milieu Therapy.”

The recreation program also teaches the proper use of leisure time. During the summer months recreations is no problem since the whole outdoors is available, however, the winter months are different. During the winter the gym in Bigfork is rented one night each week, for the use of the residents.

Medical and dental needs are cared for by a registered nurse who works half-time. The nurse is responsible for supervising medical and dental problems and works with doctors and dentists in either Bigfork or Kalispell. In September of this year an alcohol and drug counselor was added to the staff. The staff also includes a part-time chaplain who helps the young men with emotional and spiritual problems.

An education program is also conducted in the evening from 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Students write their own programs and set their own goals. Programs encompass everything from very basic functions (reading and writing) to off-campus college courses. Most of the students enter into the G.E.D. (Graduate Equivalent Degree) program and are able to attain a high school equivalency diploma. During the past year, 45 students have attained the G.E.D.

A survival skills course is also included in the training. Such things as job seeking, employment interviews, completing job application blanks, and income tax forms, handling check books, and budgeting are taught.

A Work Training Team has just been developed in which the training program of each resident is structured to meet his needs, both at the camp and after release. Each resident enters the outside world through the State of Montana Job Service. Each young man has a “training jacket” and a specific plan which is continued as he adjusts to living and training or employment in his home community.

The Bigfork Lions Club, the Eastshore Club of Flathead Lake, and the Kalispell Lions Club all contribute to the camp. The Eastshore Club’s Christmas party is an eagerly awaited annual event. The Bigfork Club conducts one meeting a year at the camp and spends considerable time in socializing with the residents.

Hopefully, in the future money will be available for a multi-purpose building. Another hope is the development of an outward-bound type of recreation program. This would include summer and winter survival programs to help residents cope with stress and discover more about themselves.

The Swan River Youth Forest Camp will be ten years old in July of 1978. A low relapse rate of 10 to 12 percent over the 10 year life of the camp indicates the camp’s effectiveness. Large volumes could be written, but it is sufficient to say that the camp really works, helping young men who desperately need help.

Lend me the stone strength of the past and I will lend you
The wings of the future, for I have them.

Robinson Jeffers

Melvin Richard Mohler—graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1949, with a B.S. in Vocational Education. He taught vocational agriculture for several years before becoming director and later superintendent of the Montana State Industrial School. In 1968 he became superintendent of the Swan River Youth Forest Camp.