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Defeminizing the Camp Warren Garden

“For the sense of smell, almost more than any other, has the power to recall memories...”
-Rachel Carson¹

Every May, the smell of spring fills my nostrils and awakens my hibernating soul that has been secluded in a florescent-lighted library for six months. With that first whiff of rebirth, my mind travels on a virtual journey up to the northern woods of Minnesota. In my mind’s eye, I travel up Interstate 35, leaving the traffic of the Twin Cities behind.² Willie Nelson and I do a duet as we pass through Cloquet and turn on to Highway 33 at the famous gas station designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. My grandfather’s old Lincoln Continental smoothly merges onto Highway 53 crossing the invisible line into the Mesabi Iron Range. The tree-lined highway opens up on the right side to reveal Half Moon Lake. From the highway I glimpse the masts of sailboats and log structures across the lake. I turn onto the old Miller highway—now Miller Trunk Road—an unkempt two-lane artifact of the pre-1956 Highway Act era. The first driveway presents a rustic sign.³ I roll down my windows, the spring odors rushing in to greet me after a long drive, and guide my car down the 10-mile-per-hour dirt road. At the end of the canopied road, the familiar green spaces and buildings of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) Camp Warren wait for me patiently, like “pals that never fail,”⁴ evoking memories from many summers spent in chaotic bliss.

I park the car by the old camp store, recently converted into the “Out of Camp Camping” center, its inner walls lined with intricate maps of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. My legs demand a walk after three hours of sedentary limpness. On my way to the lake I walk up a

¹ Carson, Rachel. *The Sense of Wonder*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965, 66.

² See Figures 1 and 2 to follow route.

³ See Figure 3.

⁴ “Camp Warren Trails.” YMCA Camp Warren Song.

man-made slope covered in a combination of matted, decaying brown grass from last fall and new green shoots reaching for sunlight. On clear nights in summers past while lying on this manmade expanse, my campers and I witnessed the mysterious Northern Lights—its atmospheric tricks overwhelming our simple human eyes. And although we seemed trapped in a time vacuum, witnessing nature’s omnipotence as Sioux and Ojibwa, fur traders, miners and homesteaders had done before us, the Northern Lights danced above great changes to this small mound in the heart of the “Sleeping Giant.”⁵

Deceiving to the unfamiliar eye, my star-gazing plot camouflages the camp’s main septic tank with a thin layer of soil that is only able to sustain grasses. Centrally-located between all major buildings and each cabin section, the “Septic Mound”—recently renamed the “Ant Hill” to reflect the several ant colonies that call this mound home, but more importantly to disguise its repulsive function—serves the camp’s many toilets, showers, and sinks.⁶ Only a small white plastic pipe emerging from the earth and a manhole hidden by tall grasses remind campers and staff what lies beneath. Before the introduction of a complex septic system to serve the post-World War II demands for flushing toilets and hot showers (versus soap baths in the lake!), this man-made mound was the site of a large vegetable garden. My dad recollects from his camper days in the late 1950s and early 1960s a plot that began near the backdoor of the kitchen and advanced to the caretaker’s house.⁷ However, the installation of the large septic tank forced the transplantation of the garden to a smaller plot several yards to the southeast where it would be largely neglected for two decades.

⁵ Ojibwa name for the Mesabi Iron Range. Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board. *Iron Range Country: A Historical Travelogue of Minnesota’s Iron Ranges*. Eveleth, MN, 1979, 97.

⁶ See Figure 4. Note the map does not label the septic mound, a deliberate omission considering how the map conveys a rustic, simplistic perspective of camp.

⁷ Interview with Tom Sipkins. November 21, 2004. See Figure 5.

Only last year did Sara Gensmer, a longtime camper and staff member, reinvigorate the garden, preparing the soil, and planting and harvesting a diverse array of vegetables.⁸

In the last 75 years evolving American cultural values led to tremendous change in these few acres' use and meaning within camp pedagogy. In the 1920s, when the Minneapolis YMCA purchased this land to build a boys' camp, elite and middle America viewed the garden as a feminine space. Connected to romantic ideas that the garden symbolizes feminine beauty and nurturing, the nature study movement deemed the garden as an ideal place to educate youth. At the same time, however, a fear had developed within the suburban middle- and elite classes that too much exposure in this feminine realm would taint boys' future leadership ability in the (white collar) workforce. The YMCA deemed camp as an outlet for boys to escape this feminine space. Camp was seen as a way to get boys out of the feminized suburbs and back to a more masculine, rugged landscape.⁹ Yet, with the purchase of the camp property in 1927, the YMCA camping services decided to maintain the vegetable garden as it transformed the Warren farmstead into a boys' overnight camp. Why did the YMCA keep the garden? What role did the garden play in the YMCA's character building mission? If the garden represents a feminine, domestic space, why were boys encouraged (or forced!) to work in the garden during "service project"? In the nascent years of Camp Warren, YMCA camping ideology eliminated the garden's association as a feminine space, implying that the garden taught boys self-sufficiency and reconnected them to the land, a relationship lost in the suburbs. The ideology that the garden does not represent a feminine, domesticated space but rather a place of production and reconnection with the earth remains an important strand in Warren's character-building mission.

⁸ See Figure 4. This early 1990s map does not label the garden, demonstrating its marginalized status in the function of the camp compared to other landmarks.

⁹ Lecture October 25, 2004.

History of the Garden

The earth on which the camp garden would eventually flourish and then decline first attracted European settlers in the 1890s for its vast pine forests. Located in the outermost zone of Von Thunen's rings, the timber on camp property—and the majority of what would become the Mesabi Iron Range—supplied Minnesota's urban centers with heat and building supplies.¹⁰ In 1908, Eveleth school teacher Polly Bullard described the deforested landscape as “monotonous stretches of stumps, with now and then a lonely clump of white pine and spruce”.¹¹ Deforestation escalated dramatically with the discovery of vast deposits of iron ore in 1891 and 1892.¹² This field of stumps represented progress to the industrialists and immigrant settlers. Huge amounts of human labor converted this wild waste into profitable iron mines that fed the nation's industrial development.¹³ To feed this influx of immigrant laborers and their families, some settlers established farmsteads a few miles from the towns. “The soil was terribly thin...[and with a] growing season of under one hundred days, much of which came with enough rain to waterlog the fields” farmers faced an uphill battle.¹⁴ Despite these obstacles, O.B. Warren and his wife Anna built a family farm on the outskirts of Eveleth, raising free-range chickens. They also planted potatoes and a small vegetable garden. After Warren's death, Anna sold the property to the Minneapolis YMCA to build a long-term boys' camp.

It was purchased for \$27,500...The property consisted of 200 acres of virgin timber, on the Miller Highway, with frontage on two lakes, Half Moon and Pleasant. It had a beautiful log lodge, a caretaker's cottage and farm buildings. *The vegetable garden produced in a year*

¹⁰ Von Thunen's Rings. Lecture October 4, 2004.

¹¹ Bullard, Polly. “Iron Range Schoolmarm.” *Minnesota History*. 32 (4). December 1951, 194.

¹² Smith, Timothy L. “Factors Affecting the Social Development of the Iron Range Communities.” 1.

¹³ Lecture October 20, 2004.

¹⁴ Johnson, Benjamin Heber. “Conservation, Subsistence, and Class at the Birth of Superior National Forest.” *American Environmental History*. Ed. Louis Warren. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2003, 187.

*\$600 worth of supplies and it was expected that it would fill the camp table during the summer.*¹⁵

With a maximum capacity of sixty in 1929, the first year of summer camp, subsistence from the garden seemed realistic.¹⁶

The national economic downturn caused by the Great Depression later that year did not curtail camp attendance; in fact, capacity grew each year so that by 1936 the YMCA had to build an additional eight cabins to house younger boys.¹⁷ This growth speaks to the type of camper attending Warren in the late 1920s until the mid-1960s: upper-middle-class, white boys sent to “nature” for several reasons. First, as I mentioned earlier, camp limited the interaction of boys with women in order to “toughen” and discipline them in a “rugged” nature, thereby ameliorating urban boys’ restlessness and sedentary, domesticated lifestyle. Second, camp “sequestered boys in pastoral seclusion”¹⁸ away from the corruptive elements of city life. Third, YMCA character-builders saw the isolation of the camp experience as a dominant site to foster religious and moral growth in these suburban middle-class boys. This “God in Nature” ideology echoes the Emersonian ideal that one can experience God anywhere. Finally, boys were sent to Nature—via camp—to relive the mythic American frontier experience.¹⁹ Living off the land (self-sufficiency) demonstrated one’s authentic American national identity. The camp garden—as a main source of subsistence—served an important function in creating the illusion that camp was a renaissance of the masculinized frontier lifestyle. As part of this frontier myth, the garden lost its association as a feminine space.

¹⁵ Wiley, S. Wirt and Lehmann, Florence. *Builders of Men: A History of the Minneapolis YMCA: 1866-1936*. Minneapolis, MN, 1938, 310. (My emphasis.)

¹⁶ “Minutes.” Meeting of the YMCA Board of Directors Held at the Minneapolis Club. October 3, 1929.

¹⁷ Wiley, S. Wirt and Lehmann, Florence. *Builders of Men: A History of the Minneapolis YMCA: 1866-1936*. Minneapolis, MN, 1938, 310.

¹⁸ Macleod, David I. *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA and Their Forerunners, 1870-1920*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1983, 235.

¹⁹ Cronon, William. “National Parks and the Trouble with Wilderness.” *American Environmental History*. Ed. Louis Warren. Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2003, 222.

Camp capacity expanded at a greater rate than the garden could sustain Camp Warren's temporary inhabitants so the garden took on a symbolic function which it maintains to this day. Although some vegetables produced in the garden supplemented meals, YMCA camp pedagogues determined that weeding the garden or peeling potatoes taught campers about hard work and discipline. Again, the garden did not resemble the beautiful flower beds in their mothers' gardens in the suburbs. Rather, YMCA character-builders saw this masculinized space as a place where young boys could take the tangible lessons of working the land into their future urban careers.²⁰

The garden's importance lessened as camp capacity expanded and the land on which the garden once flourished was needed for other functions, namely the installation of a septic tank to manage growing amounts of human waste. Despite a resurgence of the nature study in the 1950s and 1960s, the camp garden still lacks the feminine stigma normally attached to gardens. Instead, the garden continues to connect urban and suburban boys and girls to the land, demonstrating the continuing prominence of the frontier myth.²¹ Sara Gensmer hopes that campers helping her in the garden bring away a greater understanding of how food is produced, since today we are so far removed from that production. Sara also believes that the hard work involved in generating a successful harvest teaches these kids to be *less wasteful* in their consumer-driven lives, an ideological byproduct of modern environmentalism.²² The addition of a compost pile reflects the American turn toward organic gardening, particularly in the last decade. Egg shells and orange peels from distant, invisible farms help create a fertile soil in which campers learn to "nurture" plants into edible energy. Unfortunately, few campers participate in garden work. It is no longer compulsory; only a few passionate campers help Sara and other committed staff with the daily tasks of watering and weeding. The garden does not only produce that which staff or campers have

²⁰ See Figure 6.

²¹ Girls' session was first introduced in 1985 when several former campers wanted their daughters to attend Camp Warren and be able to share in the experiences they had as campers.

²² Interview with Sara Gensmer. November 21, 2004.

planted: wild berries grow on its fringes. The ghosts of gardens past also can be found if you look hard enough: next to the cultivated garden, an old tractor tire hidden by overgrown prairie grasses supports an amazing rhubarb plant. Surely, the presence of this industrial tire symbolizes the erasure of the “feminine” from this stereotypically feminine space.

The contrast of the boy in the garden versus the girls posing for a picture on the Septic Mound (now Ant Hill!)²³ demonstrates how this landscape has evolved in the last seventy-six years. The site of the garden and its function within camp pedagogy may have changed, but the YMCA successfully detached the camp garden from the greater American stigma of the garden as a feminine space. Whether to ferment the idea of self-sufficiency as part of a reclaimed American frontier experience *or* to instill a service ethic in campers *or* to view the Northern Lights on a cloudless summer night, this site and many others at Camp Warren serve as sacred grounds for several generations of campers.

²³ See Figures 6 and 7.