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Depression-era camp restored at Umstead State Park





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Jean Spooner, chairwoman of the Umstead Coalition paints the ceiling of the kitchen in the Sycamore Camp mess hall on Wednesday, May 27, 2015 at Umstead State Park in Raleigh, N.C. The Sycamore Camp was completed in 1934 by the Works Progress Administration. Most of the camp's structures have not been used for more than 30 years.
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RALEIGH — For 30 years, the cabins, bathhouses and mess hall of the Sycamore Group Camp have stood silent in Umstead State Park, their silhouettes visible through the trees from the multi-use trail parking area deep in the 5,579-acre park.

Men who signed on with the Works Progress Administration, the Depression-era jobs program, built Sycamore and three other camps in the late 1930s, using pine trees felled and milled in the park. The state shuttered Sycamore camp as a cost-saving measure



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in the 1980s and later considered tearing it down.

Now, after thousands of hours of volunteer labor and donations from businesses and nonprofit organizations, the mess hall and one group of cabins at the Sycamore camp are almost ready to host visitors again.

On Saturday, the Umstead Coalition, a nonprofit group of park supporters, will hold an open house to show off what the volunteers have accomplished. Jean Spooner, the coalition's chairwoman, said the Sycamore camp is a key part of the park's history.

"Preserving and using Sycamore Mess Hall and its cabins will enable us to better appreciate the historic resources and the soul of our park," Spooner said.

The mess hall will be rented to groups of up to 130, while eight of the cabins will be available for families looking for a rustic camping experience without sleeping in a tent.

The four group camps - Sycamore, Crabtree, Lapihio and Whispering Pines - were central to what was called the Crabtree Creek Recreational Demonstration Area in 1934, when the federal government began assembling worn-out farmland between Raleigh and Durham. The camps would provide a place for area Boy and Girl Scouts and YMCA groups to get out in nature



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without going far from home.

Sycamore Group Camp opened first, in 1937, just up the hill from Sycamore Lake, which the WPA had created with a dam on Sycamore Creek. It consisted of three pods of eight cabins, each with a small bathhouse, a lakeside lodge, a central bathhouse with showers, and a mess hall with a large stone fireplace and a full kitchen, with a walk-in freezer.

‘Wonderful experience’

Barbara Parramore began her teaching career in Raleigh in 1954 as an assistant to a fifth-grade teacher who took her class to Sycamore Group Camp for a week in the spring. The students had to plan everything, Parramore said, including what they would eat, wear and do for the week at camp.

“It was a wonderful experience,” Parramore said. “It shaped my whole career and my approach to curriculum.”

She will speak at the open house Saturday, along with two men who went to Sycamore Group Camp as boys and later as counselors.

Rex Jarrell remembers fondly going to the camp in the mid-1940s with the sons of workers from Durham’s mills and cigarette factories. His father ran a feed store in Durham, so he got out into



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the country to make deliveries from time to time. But that was nothing like camp.

“This was unique, going to a camp in a state park,” Jarrell says. “It was just really neat with the boats and the canoes. You didn’t have that. That was new, for sure.”

Jarrell is now 81 and lives in Raleigh, not far from the park, where he enjoys hiking. He said it’s remarkable how familiar the Sycamore Group Camp feels to him.

“It looks basically the same,” Jarrell said, except the trees were a bit shorter then, and the grass and underbrush showed the effects of hundreds of children. “It was well trampled back then.”

‘Scraped and scrubbed’

The buildings in the camp are in remarkably good shape for being nearly 80 years old, Spooner said, but they did require a lot of work to get into tip-top condition. Volunteers with the coalition and the Umstead 100 Endurance Run, a long-distance race in the park held each April, provided much of the labor.

“We scraped and scrubbed, scraped and scrubbed and scraped and scrubbed some more,” Spooner said.

Water rot and termites had taken a toll on many of the outside pine boards. The volunteers used rot-resistant cypress to replace



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those boards and had them rough cut like the originals. All of the exterior has been refinished in a dark brown.

“You can’t tell which is the pine and which is the cypress,” Spooner said. “We’re quite proud of that.”

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CAMP OPEN HOUSE

Learn about the effort to bring the historic Sycamore Group Camp and Mess Hall back to life on Saturday from 12:30 to 4 p.m. Hillsborough-based Phillips Phamily Band will play bluegrass, and former campers will talk about their experience at the camp. Use the Glenwood Avenue entrance and follow signs to Sycamore Multi-use Trail Head.


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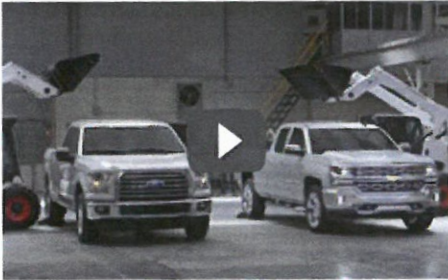


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