

# Imperiled Girl Scout camps being rescued from closure in Missouri



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BY RUTH SERVEN

*The Kansas City Star*

The to-do list to keep Camp Mintahama open often seemed overwhelming.

When a volunteer group began working on the property three years ago, the camp needed an HVAC system in the dining hall, a new dock and new roofs on the cabins in order to stay open. Slowly, volunteers have been working through the list: Placing tables and chairs into the dining hall, building a tornado shelter, hanging shutters on the art building.

Several camps have closed in Missouri, but Mintahama, near Joplin, is fighting to remain open and give Girl Scouts the chance to camp in a changing culture.

The camp was one of five camps in the Girl Scouts of the Missouri Heartland council, which covers most of southern and central Missouri, initially scheduled to close, and one of three that has so far been rescued by the work of local volunteers. Camps that risk closing wouldn't be able to be used by local Girl Scouts for camping and events, and would be eventually sold off.

"Camps are necessary," said Lisa Nelson, chairwoman of the Friends of Camp Mintahama committee. "They're near and dear to scouts because they were some of their first opportunities to be independent and express themselves on their own."

Camps Latonka, Mintahama and Sacajawea West, scattered across Missouri, represent a struggle by Girl Scouts nationwide to salvage local properties while introducing technology and new types of outdoor activities. Other councils in Kansas and Missouri have already closed camps and made upgrades to others.

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In the past decade, Girl Scouts of America has lost more than a million members and has consolidated its councils from 312 to 112. When newly consolidated councils found themselves with dropping membership and ballooning pension costs, their most obvious leverage was land — the heart of the Girl Scouts experience.

Many councils across the country divested properties in 2013. The Missouri Heartland council ended leases on two properties and sold another two camps. The council allowed three camps to remain open on a provisional basis, with orders to raise money, increase participation and fix the properties.

That three-year probation is drawing to an end. In September, troops that have painted cabins, bought kayaks and patched roofs will find out if their camps will remain open.

Community volunteers have organized support and appealed to town leaders for help. Mintahama's supporters were able to get three area Lowe's stores to invest more than \$40,000 in the camp and have support from area schools.

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Regional differences can make it challenging to offer the same types of services to all girls — wealthy families might be able to afford week-long trips, or rappelling and horse riding, while low-income families might have a harder time getting their girls to events or paying for outings.

Camps close to cities tend to have higher attendance. As a result, rural camps are often more vulnerable to closing. Working with more rural areas and smaller cities, the Missouri Heartland council is trying to be flexible about the definition of camping.

“Outdoor programs can mean a lot of different things,” said Anne Soots, CEO of the council. “It can be a day camp, an overnight camp, going to an all-day event, or going on a hike. Property is a piece of that, but you don’t have to own a piece of property to get the benefits of being outdoors.”

Some think the historic focus on the outdoors may have driven girls away from the program.

Today, Girl Scouts has 2.7 million child and adult members in the U.S. — nearly half a million fewer than in 2013, according to the organization. Similar programs, such as Boy Scouts of America, have also reported membership losses in the past few years.

Girl Scouts attributed the decline to a lack of adult volunteers and increasing demand from other organizations and activities.

But neglecting camping isn’t the answer to solving that decline, said Suellen Nelles, CEO of the Farthest North Council in Fairbanks, Alaska, where scout leaders resisted national mandates to consolidate councils and change some programs. Retaining independence, Nelles said, made her council able to buy out of the pension program and keep camps open.

“We spent 100 years accumulating camps, which are really expensive, but we were founded on an outdoor camping education for girls, and that investment is worth it,” she said.

Meanwhile, the Northeast Kansas Northwest Missouri Council has a plan to invest in its remaining properties.

At Camp Prairie Schooner, located between Lee’s Summit and Independence, girls can zipline and rappel. At Camp Daisy Hindman, located southwest of Topeka, they can go horseback riding and “creeking.”

“Camp is like magic,” said Gina Garvin, spokeswoman for the council. Camps can be outdoor classrooms and places for adventure, she said, and it’s up to the councils to invest in those properties and make them destinations for girls.

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Outdoor programs do pay off, studies show.

A 2014 study by the Girl Scouts Research Institute of 3,000 scouts found that girls who participated in outdoor activities with scouts at least once a month displayed stronger leadership and problem-solving qualities, especially when those girls were from families with lower incomes.

Researchers said they were surprised at the level of outdoor activities scouts were involved in.

“Recent concerns about the decline in children’s outdoor play and the increase in time spent sitting in front of the computer or TV screen led us to expect far less outdoor involvement,” the study said.

But 97 percent of girls surveyed said they’d done at least one outdoor activity with Girl Scouts in the past year, and a majority of respondents said they had also gone camping.

Charlotte McGreal, 10, agrees that going to camp is one of the best parts of Girl Scouts.

Charlotte, from Kansas City, went to Camp Daisy Hindman this summer. The Kansas camp is part of the Northeast Kansas Northwest Missouri council. She said she loved going to the splash park and practicing archery and canoeing.

“And the last night it rained and we got to sleep on the floor of the cabin, and it was really fun,” she said.

The scouting study also showed that monthly involvement in outdoor programs and repeated attendance at camps increased the likelihood of girls demonstrating leadership skills, one of Girls Scouts’ primary goals.

But as councils try to adjust to changing culture, they say traditional camping, with tents and s’mores, isn’t the only way to teach girls how to lead. Councils are diversifying the camping available and sometimes pair maintaining camps with the national organization’s increased emphasis on STEM, or a curriculum that teaches science, technology, engineering and math skills.

Mintahama provides chances to camp and stay in cabins, but its committee is also considering ways to expand programs and welcome local groups. The property board just approved a proposal to restore an abandoned campsite, Ahtonnali, and turn it into an outpost for extreme watersports and mountain biking. Nelson also hopes to encourage partnerships with local schools by building a course where local archers can practice.

The Kansas Heartland council has added rappelling, ziplines and outdoor classes to Camp Four Winds, east of Wichita. These kinds of activities, said Muriel Berry, director of communications for the council, can appeal to both girls' increasing desire for adventure and the national drive for more STEM programs. Girls can learn about physics on the zip line, go geocaching or participate in an astronomy field trip.

“We know we need to have a good balance of traditional camping,” Berry said. “We still have a huge member base, and that’s what they think about when they think about Girl Scouts, but we also need to be relevant to today’s girls, and that’s something we’re working on.”

Other councils have found success in turning their aging camps into STEM Centers of Excellence, such as the \$13 million campus at Camp Whispering Cedars near Dallas, Texas. The center offers a ropes course and trails as well as geology, chemistry and engineering programs.

“Maybe the idea of camp isn’t selling at the moment, but if you can combine camping with helping girls or building the next generation of leaders, that’s the story we should be telling,” said Jennifer Bartkowski, CEO of the Northeast Texas Council.

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As Girl Scouts and councils decide how to move forward after painful mergers and lost revenue, community organizations keep advocating for their camps.

Camp Sacajawea West, near Sedalia, Mo., is still open and is finishing out its three-year plan.

Lisa Henderson, fundraising chairwoman for the Friends of Camp Sacajawea committee, attaches a sentimental value to the place: Her three daughters were scouts. If the camp closes, she said, scouts in the area would have a much harder time attending a camp and staying involved in Girl Scouts.

Farther east, Eky Combs can look around Camp Latonka’s grounds and remember the lake and trees she saw as a girl — her first time camping there was at age 8. Her parents and grandparents helped build Latonka, outside of Poplar Bluff, Mo., 65 years ago, and Combs’ family is trying to keep it alive today after it was threatened with closing.

Many women in surrounding farm towns had gone to Latonka at some point, Combs said, and the community has really rallied around the camp, forming a Save Camp Latonka group.

“When they talked about closing Latonka, lots of girls came to talk at the meeting. I never felt excluded, but one girl stood up and said that going to camp was the first time she ever felt accepted and included,” said Combs, who choked up as she talked. “We have to keep it open.”

All told, the monetary and in-kind donations for Latonka have totaled about \$180,000 so far, Combs said. Her organization needs a little bit more this year to meet the requirements set by the Missouri Heartland council.

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Mary Parker, who is 11, really likes swimming, canoeing, hiking and building campfires at Camp Mintahama. She can do those things with family, of course, but there’s something special about being at camp with all of her friends.

“I would describe it as a place where you can learn leadership skills, but it’s not like school at all,” said the Springfield girl. “It’s a place where you can do activities and be outside and have a ton of fun.”

This summer, Mary went to both Mintahama and Latonka, making the four-hour drive from Springfield to Latonka just so she could attend the camp.

She’s made it her mission to help the camps stay open. When she found out that Mintahama might close, Mary told her mom that instead of birthday presents, she wanted to donate money to help the camp. From her past two birthdays, she estimated that she donated \$300 to help Mintahama. Next birthday, she plans to do it again.

She especially wants the money to go towards building Ahtonnali, the proposed watersports and mountain biking outpost at Mintahama. She thinks it would be really fun, when she’s older, to ride bikes around the campsite that she and her troop helped clean up. But most of all, she just wants to keep going to camp.



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**Lon Edwards**

Why are these camps serching for donors to keep the camps open when the Girls Scouts of America make tens of millions of dollars each year off of cookie sales? What is happening to this money?

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**Barbara Starr**

In the story it made note that 97% of girls got to camp. They will use those figures to justify all the closings. I just hope all the work they do is just increasing the sale value.

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**Julie Denzer** · Works at Retired

After the brillant "Council Merging" our new council didn't keep our resident camp open. It was decommissioned and left to rot. It was said that we had a decline in attendance there. With the council's headquarters being about 150 miles from the camp, it wouldn't be staying open.

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**Julie Denzer** · Works at Retired

We had ropes, climbing, horses, swimming and our cabins were tree houses.

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