

1 BEGINNINGS: A Humble Start

Very few things start with one person or one idea. Bethany Birches Camp is no exception. At the very beginning (early 1960s) there were two couples, Lloyd and Alice Moyer and Nevin and Lourene Bender who together combined faith, vision, hard work, and land. From this blend grew Bethany Birches Camp.



“We say ‘with God all things are possible.’ However, it takes people willing to do the sweat work and who have the vision.”

-Lourene Bender

In 1952, three couples left Pennsylvania and moved to Vermont with the goal of establishing a Mennonite Church at Bridgewater Corners. These three couples were Howard and Beulah Kulp, Lloyd and Alice Moyer and Wilmer and Jean Schmill. All three couples were from Blooming Glen Mennonite Church. From that beginning 63 years ago, Bethany Mennonite Church was born. The first pastor at Bethany Mennonite was Abram Landis. The Mennonite Church emphasizes service as an important way of expressing one’s faith. Volunteering time and labor to help other people has been the practice of both Vermont and Pennsylvania Mennonite Churches. The meeting house which Bethany Mennonite Church uses was converted and remodeled from a 19th century structure by a group of volunteers from Blooming Glen, Pennsylvania. In 1963 Nevin J. Bender arrived from Pennsylvania to become the pastor at Bethany Mennonite. It was Nevin Bender along with Lloyd Moyer who founded Bethany Birches Camp. The Camp has always experienced strong help and support from both Pennsylvania and Vermont Mennonites.

The Moyers, who came to Vermont in 1952, had noticed that many area summer

camps were very expensive. As a result, children from modest families didn’t have many options for constructive summer activity. Lloyd Moyer decided to go to Nevin Bender, who had arrived to serve as Pastor of Bethany Mennonite Church, Bridgewater Corners, in 1963, to offer some of the land that he and Alice owned on Lynds Hill Road in Plymouth, Vermont, to be used as a summer camp for youngsters. The idea resonated with Nevin’s passion for community building and Bethany Birches Camp was born. Nevin became the first Camp Director, a capacity in which he served from 1965 to 1980.

Those who have been involved with Camp only recently may have difficulty picturing what the camp was like at the very beginning. For those of us who are “newcomers” let’s read what Lourene Bender had to say about those early camp days.

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“When Lloyd Moyer came to Nevin and said he wanted to donate land for a children’s camp, the area was covered with hard hack and had to be cleared by bush hog. We had a 1 ½ year-old child and an infant and it was difficult for me

to visualize a camp being on this site. In 1965 we had two weeks of camp—a girls' week and a boys' week. We fixed meals at the parsonage [at Bethany Mennonite Church] with help and someone drove the food out to the camp area on a very bumpy road. (It's a highway now in comparison.) I remember the rainy week of girls' camp. There was no pavilion and so activities were in the tents during the rain." (Talk presented by Lourene Bender at Annual Sunday Service at Bethany Birches Camp, July 7, 2013.)

For those who wondered, "hard hack" is a native deciduous shrub which produces spike-like pink to rose-purple flowers and grows in thickets three to four feet high. A "bush hog" is a type of rotary mower which typically attaches to the back of a tractor. Blades are not sharpened as with a regular lawn mower but left dull so they can whack through dense growth. For those who did not have access to a tractor or "bush hog" a hand scythe was used to remove the "hard hack." (Thanks to Bob Lambert for describing hard hack & high bush.)

What was the Camp like in the very early years? Bethany Birches Camp had very "humble beginnings," said Steve Moyer, son of Lloyd and Alice Moyer. There were no bath houses, so you got your shower when you went swimming. The staff cabin did not exist until the 1970s; there certainly were no laundry facilities, so on the weekends the women of the church (Bethany Mennonite Church) took home the counselors' dirty laundry to wash and return clean on Sunday.

"The first year they had two platforms built with the help of a group from Salford Mennonite Church in Harleysville, Pennsylvania. They got two old army tents and had two weeks of camp—a boys' week and a girls' week. These old army tents were dark, dark green and got 'wicked hot' in the summer. It was possible to roll up the sides of the tent to try to catch the breeze, if there was any. There

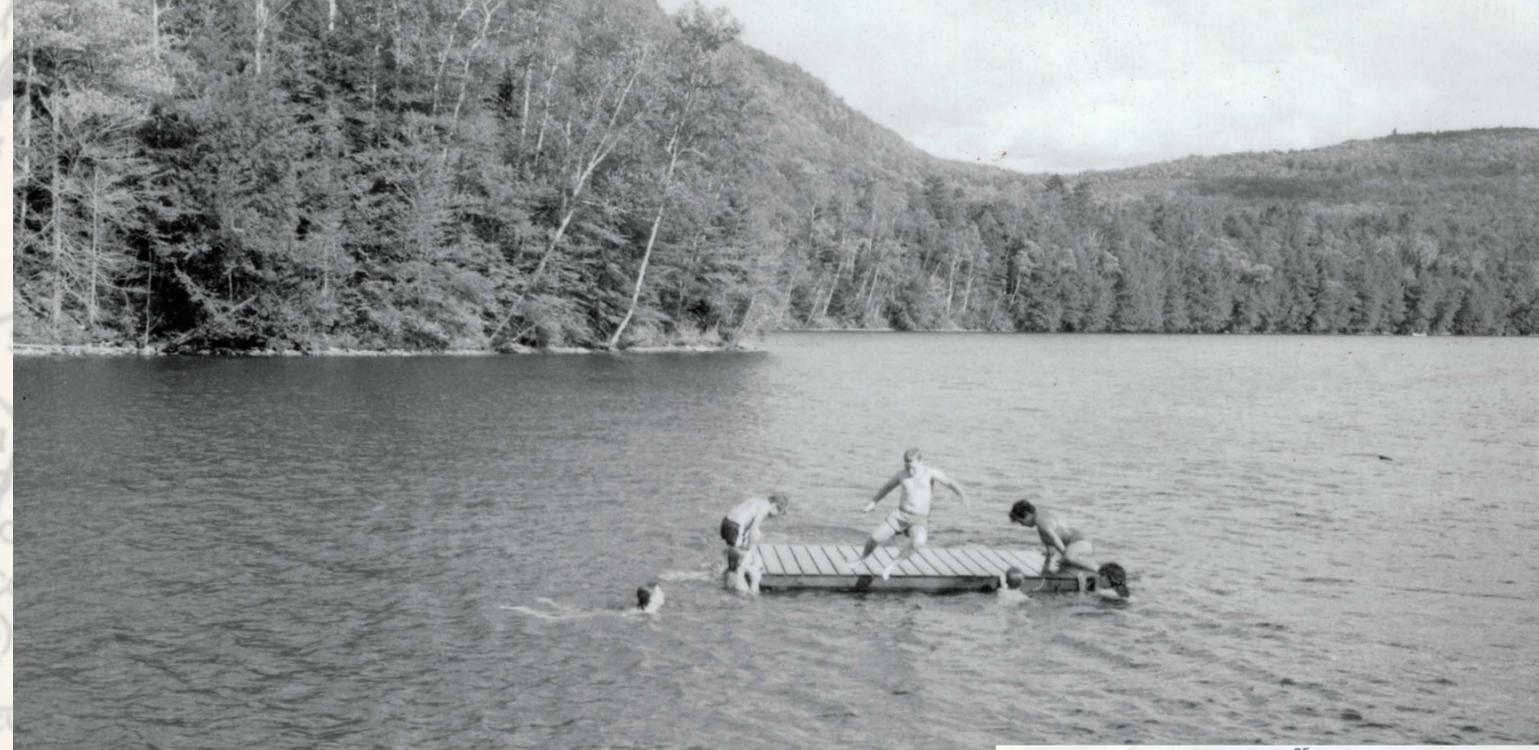
was no pavilion, so they played lots of games in the tents. The first nature trails followed old cow paths that went down to the brook." (Memories from Lourene Bender, Marcia Bender - Nevin and Lourene's daughter - and Steve Moyer)

Those first two weeks of camp took place fifty years ago. Campers and staff were "roughing it;" and Lourene Bender confesses to being relieved when camp was over that first summer. Camp programs have now expanded to 8 weeks of summer sessions plus staff reunion, winter camps throughout February and some weekends offered, especially to teens, in the fall and spring.

Now, looking back at the camp beginnings, Lourene Bender says:

"We say 'with God all things are possible.' However, it takes people willing to do the sweat work and who have the vision. Nevin did have the vision and Lloyd Moyer donated the land. One of the members of our church said later that he thought this was just a pipe dream that Nevin had and it wouldn't amount to anything. We did have lots of help from Andover and Taftsville churches. There were times we didn't know if we'd have enough counselors, but we always had camp!" (E-mail notes from Lourene Bender to Brandon Bergey, August 9, 2014.)

Where did campers go swimming in those early years? Not only was there no bathhouse on site there also was no pond. According to Steve Moyer, campers got on a bus and went down to a creek on Route 100A where there was a dam and a small swimming area. A couple of years later a pond was built which unfortunately washed out in a flood in 1973. Then another pond was built (not on site) and campers walked approximately a mile to go swimming and by the time they got back to camp everyone was all sweaty and ready to go for another swim. Ultimately staff and camp association members decided that they had to have a pond on site.



Bottom Left- Campers swimming off-site
Bottom Right & Above- Campers swim at Woodward Reservoir
Left-Right: Girls and Boys tents in July 1965 (the first tent platforms ever built at BBC!)



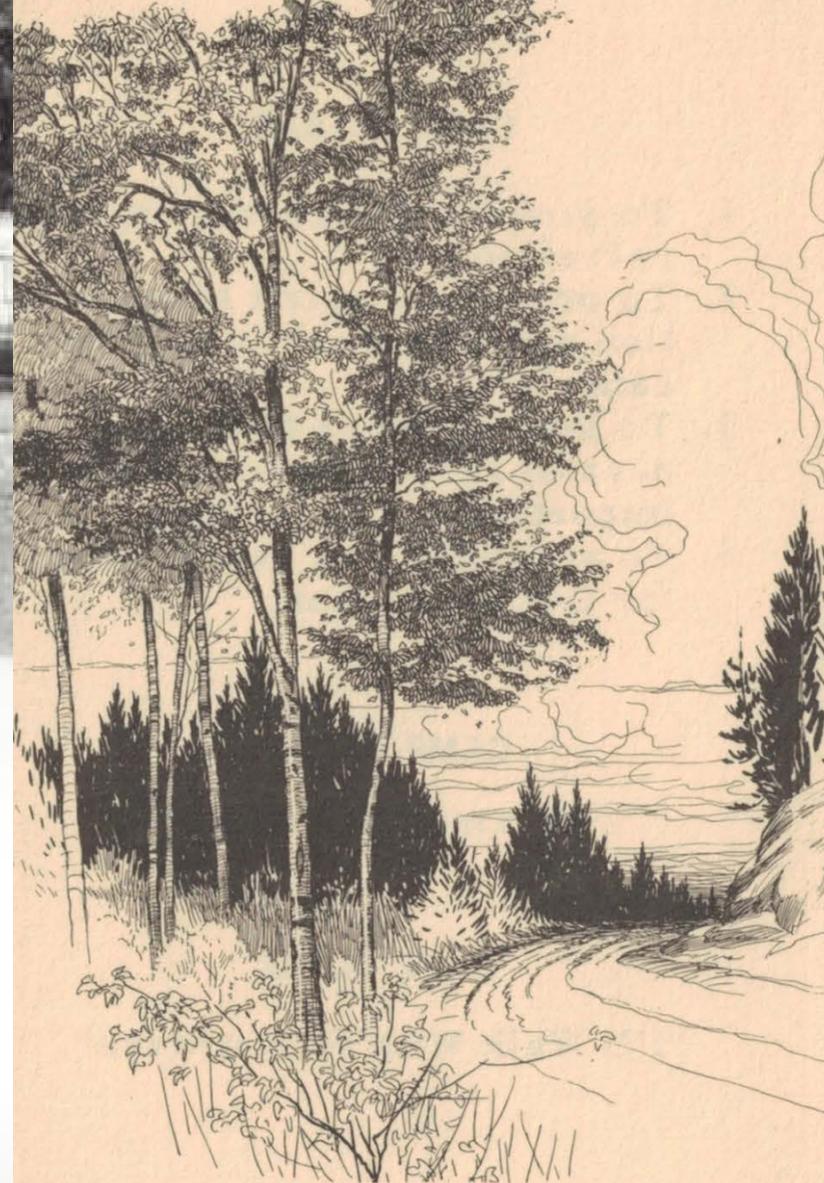


In October 1965, Pastor Nevin Bender, Bethany Birches Camp Director from 1965 to 1980, submitted a report to friends and supporters of the camp about the very first camping session held during the summer of 1965. *“The primary purpose of the camp” Bender wrote, “is to provide opportunity for children and youth from Vermont to participate in camping that has a Christian emphasis. This year a total of 83 boys and girls, ages 8–15, participated in the camp life. Bender listed three objectives for the camp that year: “First ... to provide a good time for these children...;” “Second, to strengthen their ability to cooperate with each other...;” “Third, to undergird the entire camp program with a spiritual emphasis...” Bender ended his report with this request: “Pray for the continued work of the camp.”*

Today, we continue to ask for your prayers for Bethany Birches Camp, the staff and, most important, the campers. *“We’re not that far away from 1965,”* said Steve Moyer. The Camp’s mission is still the same—helping young people develop a relationship with their creator.



Pictured top: Nevin Bender sharing with campers, 1970’2
 Pictured bottom: BBC land being cleared, 1960’s
 Pictured far right: BBC Brochure cover, 1967



*“Walking
 With Jesus”*

BETHANY BIRCHES
 CAMP
 1967

1960’s CAMP FAST FACTS:

- 🌲 **Camp only cost \$10**
- 🌲 **There were no permanent shelters, only tents on wood platforms**
- 🌲 **Camp T-Shirts only cost \$1.50 (now they cost \$10)**
- 🌲 **The pond didn’t exist yet, so campers had to hike a mile to the nearest swimming hole (and later on took a bus to a nearby reservoir).**
- 🌲 **Packing list calls for a sleeping bag OR 3 warm blankets**
- 🌲 **The Top 5 Hits at camp (1965):**
 - Kum by Yah**
 - Jacobs Ladder**
 - Mountain Boy**
 - Happy and you know it**
 - Five hundred miles**