

The Reunions of Old Kia Kima: THIRTEEN YEARS OF PIONEERING SPIRIT

By Ron "Tater" Tate

The year was 1993. The group was small, only four men. Perry Gaither, Gordon "Scotty" Monteath, John Ozier and David Fleming, all former Kia Kima staffers, had gathered on the South Fork for a 3-day July reunion. It was a time for re-testing their canoeing skills and re-kindling the spirit of brotherhood so deeply appreciated before their paths had scattered them far and wide. Highlighting this small reunion was the visit to old Kamp Kia Kima.

David Fleming would later recount, "As we arrived on those sacred grounds an ominous black cloud appeared overhead, accompanied by an unseasonable chilling wind blowing the top limbs of the trees. The resulting goose bumps gave us a sense of the presence of kindred spirits who had shared these sacred grounds with us. Then and there, with a few tears streaming down our faces, we concluded that we should do something to preserve and sanctify the place where so many of us had started our trek toward manhood."

While these men didn't realize it at the time, "Preserving the Place" was the very seed from which would grow The Old Kia Kima Preservation Association. That small reunion was the first to be planted. From that time until the present, each year has witnessed a remarkable growth of active members, each of whom contributed immeasurably to the eventual recapture and rebirth of Old Kia Kima.

The Commitment

The 1994 reunion included the arrival of John Hurt, Lofton "Buddy" Keltner, and Ralph Young. Talk focused on purchasing 5-7 acres of the old campsite, including the waterfront. Their thoughts ranged from restoring the cabins and the Thunderbird Nest to simply purchasing the property and having Mother Nature reclaim it in perpetuity (sic). There was a strong consensus to do whatever was necessary to prevent its use as a dumping site and to avoid commercialization similar to what had happened to Kamp Kiwani, complete with neon signs. The Girl Scouts of yesteryear still mourn what happened to their beloved Kamp Kiwani.

The Charter

In January of 1996, The Old Kia Kima Preservation Association was officially chartered as a non-profit Arkansas Corporation. Based on that date, one might proffer that the 2005 reunion will "officially" be the ninth. Official or not, this year marks the thirteenth reunion of the men of Old Kia Kima. One thing is for certain. Every one of our brothers who were present during the two or three year period prior to OKKPA being chartered takes great pride in having been a participant in the origin of our great organization.

The Plan

During each year's get-together, starting in 1993, Old Kia Kima men collectively noodled the inception of a plan which would lead us down the path to officialdom. And here we

are. To us, the '93 reunion is about as official as it gets. That year was the year of the first Old Kia Kima reunion. So it was, and forever more shall be.

On Being Prepared

Our beloved old Scouting axiom, "Be Prepared," didn't work so well in 1993. As preparation goes, the four founders of OKKPA weren't prepared for what they would find when they left Memphis after meeting with Frank "Simon" Simonton. While the purpose of the small gathering was to visit the ruins on the hill, they had been told in advance of the conditions they would find. They were not prepared for the sadness and tears that the sight would bring to their eyes. How odd that sadness...tears...wind and rain can so motivate a tiny band of brothers to vow together that their old camp deserved a renewed life of dignity beyond it's previous history.

A Pioneering Spirit

The legacy of OKKPA started then, with the four close-knit brothers returning to their homes to call, email, network...whatever it took to increase their numbers for the next year. You know the rest of the story. The snowballing effect of word-of-mouth brought other brothers to the scene in succeeding years, with many long hours of discussion and planning on the menu for the future of OKKPA.

OKKPA reunions began in 1993, prior to our being chartered in 1996. So, you may now look forward to the thirteenth reunion. To assume otherwise would be akin to telling our early pioneers that their thirteen colonies didn't count as part of the United States of America before 1776.

Most OKKPA members are comfortable with the 1993 inception of OKKPA and the rebuilding idea. Thankfully, whether we're having the 13th reunion or the 9th, is inconsequential...for nothing can affect the accomplishments and the spirit of the men of Old Kia Kima. Our legacy is disarmingly simple. We shall all remain as most fortunate beneficiaries of A Time & Place.