

Return to Old Kia Kima and the South Fork

April 21-26, 2010

This was far more than a sentimental journey. True enough, there are lots of deeply significant memories of this special place along the South Fork in the foothills of the Ozarks. As far back as 1996 the former counselors, David Fleming, John Ozier, Frank Simonton, Roy Riddick et.al. had been on a mission to restore the grand old camp and make it into a model camping venue for all kinds of Scouting and other youth groups. I had monitored their progress with great interest, but always from afar as wife Shirley's health continued on its downhill slide. The camp was virtually fully restored by 2004 and as of this camping season 2010 expect to have over 100 groups use the facility. The intended design of the facility is to compliment not compete with existing camp facilities of the Chickasaw Council BSA.

Early February not two months after Shirley's death I got a call from **Rick Phillips**, chairman of the board and fellow United Methodist. At the behest of David Fleming, who would be unable to attend the Spring gathering, Rick wanted to extend a personal invitation to me to come up for a visit in April so I could get a firsthand look at the camp and meet the corps of active supporters of this most worthy project. Without any second thoughts I committed to attend and over the months emailed various contacts about my much anticipated return to Kia Kima. As the usual chaplain for this gathering, Jim Bottrell, would be unable to give the Sunday Vespers service, I agreed to stand in for him. As the days marched toward mid April, news came of Perry Gaither's death. So my mission would be to mark his passing at this first gathering later in the month. Perry had been a cabin mate, co-staff member on the Waterfront, and a mentor in the Order of the Arrow and Native American lore for the entire four years I was on staff at

camp. His impact on me was perhaps nearly as great as that of Roy Riddick, though I hardly appreciated that until his death this spring.

As numerous groups were arriving at different times for board meeting etc. and since good friend Forest Priddy was not going this year, I decided to go alone. I got the directions for the OKKPA website and Mapquest and set out mid-morning Wednesday April 21. This was my first return visit to the vicinity of Hardy since the summer of 1960 when my newly married brother Eddie and his bride Ann took me and my then fiancée Shirley camping at Bigger's Ferry. That was a very brief visit overnight. And we didn't expose the girls to much of the camp scenery at that point. Otherwise the last time I had actually been in camp was the summer of 1957 when I served a brief stint on staff between various high school conferences. Boys State and the like.

The roads in NE Arkansas were much improved over what they were 50 years ago. But as I inched toward Hardy beyond Pocahontas, the route became very familiar indeed. The same windy roads nestled in rocky hills strewn with Pine and scrub grass. Finally the Spring River came into view to my left. Not as large as I remembered it. But just as emerald green with laughing rapids leaping over the rocks. Driving into Hardy was also familiar until you reached the point of the old bridge washed out in the cataclysmic flood ca. 1982.

I remembered that first magical visit the summer of 1951 when my parents drove my older brother Eddie and me to camp. We also brought an older Scout from our troop David Fleming. David was two years my senior and Flaming Arrow patrol leader. His parents had recently divorced. David has since commented that my parents were especially kind to him on that trip to Hardy back in 1951. David and I would return again, but on the staff the summer of 1954 and room together in cabin two.

A new bridge spanned the Spring a bit further down just about at the place of Rio Vista. You could see Y Falls from the road. Meandering along the roads running off the main road you still went right through old Camp Kiwani and Miramechee. A somewhat improved shallow bridge spanned at the old Kiwani waterfront not 500 yards below the Kia Kima waterfront. Driving around for several miles with well marked signs on the Northern boundary of the camp (the roads John Hurt drove the old camp truck with gusto) I came to the entry of Old Kia Kima. I parked outside on the road and walked in. Looking down the hill in Southeasterly direction I could see the restored Thunderbird Nest and the quadrangle of cabins in the original locations looking far better than when I first saw them Summer of 1951. It was a breathtaking vista. Seemingly the place had not changed at all. It shouldered its original majesty and calm and one to re-embrace its wisdom and inspirations.

The first soul to spot me was Rick Phillips. We hadn't seen each other before. But he knew I was due in. Right away he assigned Neal Talley, a really generous and kindly soul who Forest Priddy commended most highly. Neal was handy with the golf cart as he was somewhat impaired with a prosthesis on one leg. He oriented me to the entire camp and some of the key players—the first being David Logan Mr. Scoutmaster and unofficial curator of the Thunderbird collectables. I heard Buddy Keltner (who could ever forget his voice!) and his longtime friend and our ageless Scouter extraordinaire Bill Dixon. I did drop in for a visit on the dispensary where my brother's name Eddie Morton was inscribed for his brief tenure the summer of 1954. In less than an hour Neal had taken me to most of the key points of the old camp, most notably the Ralph and Martha Young Chapel and the Ole 97 Bridge dedicated to long time Scoutmaster Buddy Irwin. As the driving tour came to a conclusion, Neal left me at the old steps down to the waterfront. I had to go around for several hundred

yards to get to the waterfront. But it was pretty much intact even if the far bank had eroded and the old slough to the East was no more. There now was a wide and apparently relatively shallow channel. But the water was still the same deep and mysterious green gently and inexorably making its way to the main Spring River five miles or so further East. Later I would reconnect with Frank Simonton, whose towering presence I still recalled from my first stint as waiter and he was head of dining hall in summer of 1951. That acquired fear of being waiter was my initiation into the experience of visceral existential anxiety!

Among the new facilities were the dinning pavilion at the top of the hill. It is next to the main office and on the site of the old pump house and supply shack going back 50 years. The pavilion has a full service kitchen as well as restroom. Down the hill situated West of where the old dining halls used to be is a bath house with both male and female restrooms and showers. The facilities are adequate to accommodate co-ed groups of about 60 persons. All of the construction has been carried out by local contract and former staffer Bobby Williams. He and his wife have made Hardy their home since the early 1960s. The handy work and construction are of the highest quality thanks to Bobby. As has been the recent policy, women from both the YWCA and Girl Scout camps Miramechee and Kiwani have been active participants. Several were present this trip, the most notable of which was Pat Moody. I had known about her when Shirley worked at the Girl Scouts office in Memphis and Pat was president of the board. She is also a close friend of Forest Priddy's sister. Pat exercised a sometimes steadying presence when the guys tended to push matters to the edge.

A number of the men were already hard at work clearing debris and cutting away brush. With the heavy forested campus we were fortunate to have Mark Follis a seasoned exceptionally well trained arborist (PhD no less) to oversee cutting and cultivating of trees. It

was remarkable to witness the unrelenting work especially among the younger generation whose primary attachment was to the new Kia Kima, not this site. Their fervor for this enterprise equals that of the first generation and is one of the reasons this venture has met with such unqualified success. Memory does not serve well on recall of the names of this later generation. But those who come to mind most readily are Rick Schmid, Dennis Cain, Jim Moore, Mike Bowman, Dan McGuire Bill Harrison, and of course Boyd Billingsley, who grew up with me at Highland Heights Methodist Church and whose father was my Sunday school teacher. It was of course Boyd's uncle George Billingsley who in 1998 donated 43 acres to complete the restored camp's grounds. Jimmie Bottrell arrived later in the day but had to leave the next day due to a death in the family. Several of the Miramechee/Kiwani group were there also and provided some excellent meals as well as liquid refreshment. Ron Tate, more commonly known as Tater arrived the Wednesday from his home in Destin. He was a contemporary of Roy Riddick at Messick graduating in 1955. Ron, Roy, David Fleming, John Ozier had made the restoration of OKK a high priority.

Our regular scouting friend Marvin Richardson was brought to camp by someone from St Luke's Troop 40. Marvin provided ample historical recapitulations of many scouting events over the last century in minute detail as was his custom.

The second day's work dealt with launching the swim dock and resurfacing roadways and pathways in camp. Very capable handling of the camp tractor had these task completed in good order by the time threatening storm clouds began to gather toward the weekend.

The board met and re-met as weather permitted and took care of its necessary business.

Roy Riddick arrived Thursday, having driven all the way from Mobile arriving mid-afternoon. It was heartening to see Roy. The last time I had seen him was when his mother died, I believe which

must have been better than ten years ago. Saw him very briefly outside Memorial Park Funeral Home as he was departing. We had no time to chat. But this time was different. Roy and I together with his good friend Ron Tate spent many hours reminiscing about life on the South Fork and in the mid-South and the world generally the last half century.

Roy Riddick was program director my first summer on staff in 1954.* He had been on my OA ordeal the previous summer and had impressed me considerably as a young man who had a keen sense of himself and how he was oriented to life with purpose and meaning. While Roy had a sense of humor there was no getting around the intensity of his mission. We were about serious business at Camp Kia Kima. The lives of these boys could be influenced and shaped in ways we would never fully appreciate at the time. Over the next four years Roy served as program director he would return from Princeton with stories of his encounters with major figures in the academic world I had no inclination existed. He spoke of going to class with the very affluent as well as those of modest means like himself because Princeton had a generous scholarship program. By summer of my senior year he had persuaded me to apply, though I thought my chances slim to none I would be admitted.

Miracle of miracles, I was somehow admitted. I think I was on a wait list and some jerk opted to go to Yale, so I got in. Roy was a big help in getting me oriented and even gave me his dorm furniture. You had to supply your own at Princeton in those days. He shepherded me along throughout my first couple of years and I am convinced greased the way for my invitation to Cap and Gown Club to which he had been a member.

* Roy's first trip to Kia Kima was 1949, same summer as my brother Eddie. They both had Doris Goodman as provisional scoutmaster. Whether they were there the same time, I do not know.

Roy and I caught up on what had happened to many of our old colleagues from KK 1954-57. I was able to share the story of Eddie's short lived career in the Air Force and his untimely death in Vietnam 1969. We discussed our experiences of living and working and wringing our hands with the civil rights struggles in the 1960s and since; and how each of us had come finally to a retired state in our respective careers. Roy has distinguished himself as forensic pathologist in Mobile Alabama and continues to teach at the medical school there.

There aren't many times you have an opportunity to say face to face how much someone has meant in the direction and shape of your life. I got to do that with Roy this trip. It was with the greatest satisfaction I could tell Roy how much he had influenced my life, for the good. There is no way to assess where I would have gone or what I would have done without his friendship and mentoring in those formative years for me. Roy had always embodied to me the very spirit of the Order of the Arrow—the brotherhood of cheerful service. I hope in some humble way I too have measured up to this exalted standard.

The winds and rains blew through Hardy without much effect except to swell the Southfork and complicate our morning breakfast at Cherokee Village. Meanwhile back in Memphis they were having harrowing windstorms and torrential downpours.

I took the orientation tour for camp rangers and hope to do that duty sometime this summer. As the weather was threatening, we held Sunday vespers in the dinning pavilion. I did the honors with some specific mention and recollection of Perry as well as our other brothers who had passed on. We broke camp and departed for Memphis around 10AM. I took Marvin Richardson and Dennis Cain drove Neal Talley home while Rick Schmid caravanned with us until we arrived in Memphis around 2PM.

It was an altogether satisfying and gratifying trip. It was in some ways highly pivotal for me and brackets my life in very profound ways. The summer of 1955 was my last summer as a single individual. Like most guys then I had girl friends I wrote while at camp. The first year it was Joyce Jacobs. The second year (1955) it was Martha Bowen. But I was really never serious over them. The summer of '55 was my last time at camp when I was so to speak "footloose and fancy free". Not a care in the world really. It wasn't until later that year I began dating Shirley Nolen, our first date instigated by Rex Waddell's girl friend Barbara Lou Smart. After that I had been forever smitten and in love with Shirley. I would return to camp the next two summers. But always love sick to be back with her at summer's end. Hardly without much let up we were an item until we married summer of 1961 and remained happily married 48 years until her death last November. So as I returned to Kia Kima this year, it was again to find my life in some sense without her again as it had been back in 1955. Coming here and renewing old friendships and meeting new friends will help me on this journey.