

**Event commemorating the wonderful memories and events
at Camp Gertrude Bryant
Girl Scout camp in Avon, CT from 1947-1965
By Jeannie Parker, one of the organizers of the event**

A highlight at summer's end in 2014 for many in town and the valley was the re-creation of "A Day at Camp Gertrude Bryant." The event drew several generations of former campers to the Avon Sr. Center. The camp, first established for Girl Scout's in 1947, eventually welcomed all girls and, the last few years of its existence, boys from 1st to 4th grade attended. It closed in 1965 after 21 years.

The day was a barrel of fun from beginning to end. "Campers" arrived in their camp clothes with brown bag lunch in hand, ready to re-enter a world from their youth. Memories quickly came to life as they recognized old friends, saw familiar signs for their camp units, viewed exhibits of old photos, checked out history displays and spotted lunch tables featuring mess kits as part of the centerpieces. The latter elicited a smile from those who remembered cooking meals when camping overnight.

These "kids at heart" were noisy and enthusiastic but settled down when the day began with the traditional flag raising, Pledge of Allegiance and singing of "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Representative girls from the Daisy, Brownie, Junior, and Cadette Girl Scouts recited the Girl Scout Promise. The girls included Haley Bertsch, Paige McCracken, Brynn McCracken, Caitlin Mussa and Phoebe Finch and their two scout leaders, Helaine Bertsch and Gina Finch.

A brief history of Camp Gertrude Bryant enlightened the audience. As youngsters, most were unaware of the origin of the camp's name. A young woman from Avon named Gertrude Bryant died of an illness while serving in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) Motor Pool in Washington, D.C. in 1944. She grew up in Avon and had been a very active Girl Scout, attaining its highest award, the Golden Eaglet. She later became a valued leader. At the end of the first year the camp was dedicated in her memory.

Honored guests included members of the Thomas A. Burnham family. Present were son Peter and his wife Lynda, their son John and grandson Jakob. The Burnhams generously allowed the scouts to build the girls' camp on their property. In the 60s, they sold the land to Avon for the new Avon High School. However, the camp was allowed to remain in session for several more years. The Burnhams also donated the land on the west side of the road for the West Avon Community Club and the little fire station which still stands today. Their generosity provided the community with property for facilities for a social center which local folks enjoyed from the 20s through the 90s.

Other special guests recognized included a former Girl Scout leader, Dottie St. Pierre, who was Gertrude Bryant's close friend; Bev Selberg Benson, camp counselor and assistant director for many years; Ernie Rettig, former president of the Avon Lions Club which supported the camp; his wife Barbara, a member of the Avon Women's Club, longtime sponsors of the local Girl Scouts; Ethel Kotarba, parent representative whose daughter and a son attended the camp during its heyday, and finally, members of the Avon Historical Society who recorded the event by taking photos and conducting interviews. Katie Power Ruez, former director in 1949 and 1950, joined the festivities later in the day. Midge Smith, who now lives in NC, was unable to attend. She held the prize as director with the longest tenure – 10 years! Many campers and counselors were disappointed not to reconnect with her.

The ladies (and one very brave man who attended) launched into the day's activities. The old fashioned arts and crafts project tables were alive with campers making beaded necklaces and bracelets, stamping note cards and bookmarks, weaving potholders, creating God's eyes and tapping into their memories to draw a large map of the campgrounds. The tables were alive with laughter and stories of day and overnight camping, swimming

in the cold, spring fed Community Club Pool, sleeping overnight in the tents or on the ground around the flagpole, learning camp craft skills and working on Girl Scout badges, nature study, sports and more.

The tales continued throughout lunch time as each memory sparked another. The memorabilia including Girl Scout merit badge sashes, pins and uniforms from Brownies and Girl Scouts served as spring boards for conversation. The arts and crafts that were saved and treasured over the years were dusted off and put on display much to the delight of the campers.

Following lunch, everyone gathered around the indoor 'campfire' to sing songs, relate more stories of camp experiences, enjoy some relay races, snack on s'mores and enjoy the camaraderie. The day ended, just as it did when Camp Gertrude Bryant existed, with the lowering and proper folding of the flag and singing of "Taps". It was obvious the Girl Scout round "Make New Friends but Keep the Old" was taken to heart by all who attended that day.