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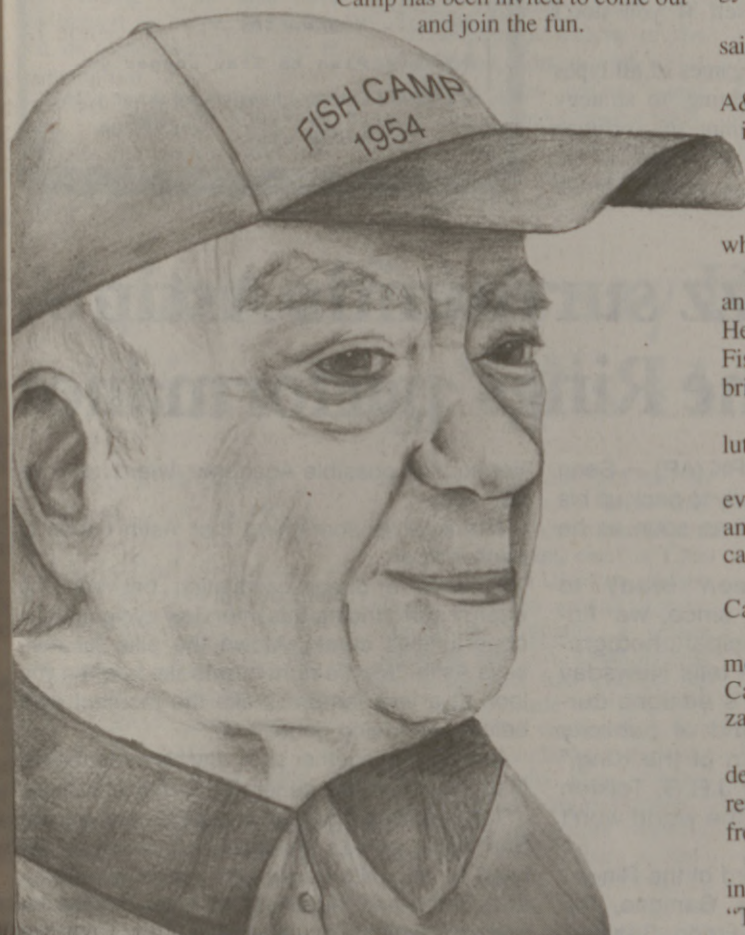
FISH CAMP COME BACK

Former and current students look back as Fish Camp's 50th anniversary approaches

By Julie Siddique
THE BATTALION

It all started in 1954 when a man named Gordon Gay, a former Texas A&M student activities director, took a few young men camping. Little did he know that this trip would mark the beginning of one of the largest and most spirited activities on campus: Fish Camp.

Next fall, A&M will celebrate Fish Camp's 50th birthday and will host a Fish Camp Reunion on Sept. 10-11. It is Fish Camp's first formal reunion, and everyone who has ever been involved with Fish Camp has been invited to come out and join the fun.



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In the past 50 years, Fish Camp has grown into an independent student organization that involves approximately 6,000 people each year, including roughly 4,500 freshmen and 1,500 counselors and staff members.

In fact, Fish Camp is the largest voluntary extended orientation program in the nation and has been recreated by other universities around the country.

"Other schools have programs like Fish Camp, but as far as I know, few schools' programs are nearly as strong or have lasted for so long and made such an impact," said Ryan Alexander, a senior kinesiology major and Fish Camp counselor.

Fish Camp serves as a model of excellence in orientation programs, said Alexander.

"Every year, universities from around the nation come to visit A&M and Fish Camp to start a similar program at their school or improve an existing one," said Dave Stanfield, an A&M graduate and former Fish Camp counselor working on the reunion.

The Fish Camp Reunion this fall will be an opportunity to celebrate the success of the organization and appreciate the people who have contributed to it over the years.

"So many people have contributed and given to the organization and it will be an opportunity to appreciate them," said Brad Henderson, a construction science management student and former Fish Camp director. "We are looking forward to an opportunity to bring everybody back."

The reunion will commemorate generations of Aggies and the evolution of the Fish Camp organization.

"The reunion will be an opportunity to see how Fish Camp has evolved over the years," Henderson said. "In 1954, A&M was still an all-male cadet school and now we have an increasingly diverse campus."

The reunion will also help create a network of former Fish Camp participants.

"We hope to bring the network together so that we can raise money for scholarships to help students who can't afford Fish Camp," Henderson said. "We want to help give back to the organization."

While much has changed, such as the size of Fish Camp and the demographics of participants, Fish Camp's original goals have remained the same: to provide an accepting environment to all new freshmen.

"The reunion is going to be huge for A&M," said Lacey Lynch, an industrial distribution junior and director of Fish Camp for 2004. "Things have changed so much in 50 years but Fish Camp's mission and values have remained the same."

Fish Camp's mission since its beginning has been to welcome freshmen into the Aggie Family by creating a support system that allows them to build relationships and share in the Aggie Spirit. Several students agree that Fish Camp has been largely successful in achieving these goals.

"When I came to Fish Camp, I wasn't really an A&M fan, but Fish Camp made me realize that I made the right decision," Alexander said. "I was impressed by the upperclassmen's interest in freshmen. We were important enough for them. We were a part of the community. That really impressed me."

Over the years, Fish Camp has played an instrumental role in developing Aggie spirit and identity, Stanfield said.

"I didn't realize it at the time, but Fish Camp is what started my love for Texas A&M. I knew after Fish Camp that Texas A&M was different from other schools (in a good way)," Stanfield said.

Fish Camp has also provided a safe atmosphere for freshmen to become familiar with the school and its many traditions.

"I think Fish Camp was a place we could let our guard down and open up and be receptive to the love that A&M has to offer," Lynch said. "Fish Camp was a place we could discuss our fears and misconceptions about college. It was a starting point for building relationships and confidence."

Stanfield said Fish Camp has provided 50 years of students with memorable experiences.

"It was definitely a worthwhile experience, it was an opportunity to feel accepted, experience a sense of belonging," Henderson said.

In addition to a sense of belonging and comfort, Fish Camp provided an opportunity to meet people and make good friends, Lynch said.

"Personally, most of my friends and my roommate I met through Fish Camp. Fish Camp has shaped my entire A&M experience," Alexander said.

Tentative plans for the reunion celebrations include a staff social, First Yell and Midnight Yell Practice on Friday. On Saturday there will be a director breakfast, mini-reunions for different camps and years, a barbeque, an all Fish Camp tailgate party, the football game against Wyoming and Haywood live in concert.

Reunion organizers are also considering putting together a photomural and a timeline of Fish Camp over the years, Henderson said.

The plans are still in the development stage.

All the main events are planned, but the details for each of them are still coming together. The 50th Anniversary Web site, <http://fishcamp.tamu.edu/50th/50th.htm>, will stay updated with the most current information about the reunion.

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