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MISSION STATEMENT

To share the diverse history and culture of the Greenbrier Valley.



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Camp Alleghany, One of The Oldest Summer Camps in the Virginias, Celebrates A Century of Nurturing Girls

By Taylor Baldwin Kiland

*“Each summer we come here,
Some things are always new.
Some things don’t change, come what may.
We have at ‘Ghany
A place for memories.
Remember if you ever pass this way.”*

The founding of one of the oldest girls’ camps in the Virginias, Camp Alleghany, started with a canoe trip down the Greenbrier River. At least, that is the folklore passed down through the generations and decades. Dr. Walter Hullihen, the 1898 founder of Camp Greenbrier for Boys in Alderson, West Virginia, wanted to open a camp for girls to replicate Greenbrier’s success. It was 1921 and the American summer camp movement was exploding—at least up and down the East Coast. Between 1900 and 1918, the number of summer camps for youth increased from 100 to more than 1,000.¹

Summer camps were first offered to boys as an antidote to what many Victorians in the late nineteenth century viewed as an increasingly urban and industrialized life for children. Getting back to nature, if only for a few weeks, could instill in youth the skills and experiences—building fires, sleeping outdoors—that were missing from “modern” society. The summer camp movement soon extended to girls, but the societal objective was different: to foster a new generation of independent, self-reliant women. Leaving home for a few weeks was designed to give girls a rare opportunity to develop self-

confidence. The growth of girls’ summer camps dovetailed with the growth of the Girl Scouts in the United States, another organization with a mission to develop strong-minded young women. Founded in 1912, the Girls Scouts of the U.S.A. was running some 300 Girl Scout camps around the country by 1925.² The Camp Fire Girls and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) were also establishing camps during this time of exponential growth.

This trend would not have been lost on Dr. Hullihen. He had just been named the new president of the University of Delaware. When he was interviewing for the job, he told the search committee that he took great pleasure in the work of running Camp Greenbrier and its success as a business.³ By 1920, Camp Greenbrier had been in operation for two decades and was one of the largest such camps in the country. Hullihen also realized sizeable revenue from this camp: \$35,000 to \$40,000 in two months (July and August)—approximately \$580,000-\$746,000 in 2024 dollars. During those two months, he earned \$5,000-\$7,000—equivalent to some \$79,000-\$110,000 in today’s dollars. He told the search committee that he could only accept the job at the

university if they could replicate his income from Camp Greenbrier, which they did.

Dr. Hullihen was also a big fan of long canoe trips and the Greenbrier River was ideal for this sport. As the story goes, he and Sweet Briar College professor Hugh S. Worthington were on a 40-mile canoe adventure upriver from Alderson in search of a suitable spot to establish a girls' camp. Paddling near Caldwell, the two men spotted a wide expanse of cow pasture and a timber camp. Nestled between the sloping Alleghany mountains and the east bank of the Greenbrier River, the farmland boasted only two structures: a farmhouse-style "cottage" with a wraparound porch and a barn (Figure 1). The property was not easily accessible by land—only via an old logging road that snaked over the mountain behind the pasture.



Figure 1. This 1921 map shows two dots (encircled) denoting the two existing structures on the land (the cottage and an old barn) when Camp Allegheny was founded in 1922. These dots are also on a 1911 map, not shown.

At the time, the property was owned by the Totten family, whose holdings included significant acreage on the west side of the river. On this land parcel stood the Stone Manse, a Federal-style house built in 1796 on a bluff above the river. The house served as the first manse of the Old Stone Presbyterian Church in Lewisburg (also built in 1796). The stone house, for which Stonehouse Road is named, was constructed using the smooth flat river stones found in the riverbed, and is considered one of the earliest permanent structures in the area. It was built by the second officiant of the church, Rev. Benjamin Porter Grigsby.⁴

The house and the land changed hands several times during the 19th century, but Thomas Kennison Totten's family bought the house and the acreage on both sides of the river in 1902. According to Sam Dawson, current owner of Camp Allegheny, Dr. Hullihen and Professor Worthington sought the land at the right time: Mr. Totten was behind on his taxes and unloading the cow pasture acreage on the other side of the river helped him out financially.⁵ Hullihen and Worthington secured their initial purchase of 15 acres⁶ for \$3,950 "for the establishment, maintenance, and conduct of a summer school and camp for the education of girls and young ladies, which is generally called and known as 'Camp Allegheny'"⁷ (Figure 2).

As they made plans for the opening season of this new girls' camp, Professor Worthington's wife Helen tapped into her twenty-five years of experience attending Camp Aloha in Vermont, one of the earliest New England girls' camps (Figure 3). She imported many of the Aloha music traditions, which endure today. Other traditions of Camp Allegheny seemed to have been common in the early summer camps, like the bestowing of a "Camp Spirit" award to the girl who has shown to be the most thoughtful, generous, and kind camper. Also popular at many of these early summer camps was a summer-long

intramural competition. At Allegheny, campers are randomly assigned to either the Blue Team or the Gray Team and engage in games and sports activities. A team winner is announced at the end of the summer. Banners noting these victories dating back to Allegheny's inaugural summer still adorn the walls of the Allegheny's assembly and performance building, the Play Hall.

Helen's sister, Anna Worthington Coale, wrote a pioneering book on the early American girls' camp movement called *Summer in the Girls Camp*, which most likely influenced the Worthingtons and Dr. Hullihen as they planned the opening sessions of Camp Allegheny. Published in 1919, it described the potential activities girls could expect to experience: tennis, paddling, swimming, baseball, basketball, gardening, basketry, embroidery, forestry, Red Cross/life-saving skills, dramatics, riding, and walking. But it also emphasized the educational benefits of communal living for girls.⁸

The first season of Camp Allegheny for Girls opened in the summer of 1922 with forty campers in attendance.⁹ Helen Worthington wrote a letter to these girls on the eve of the opening of Camp Allegheny:

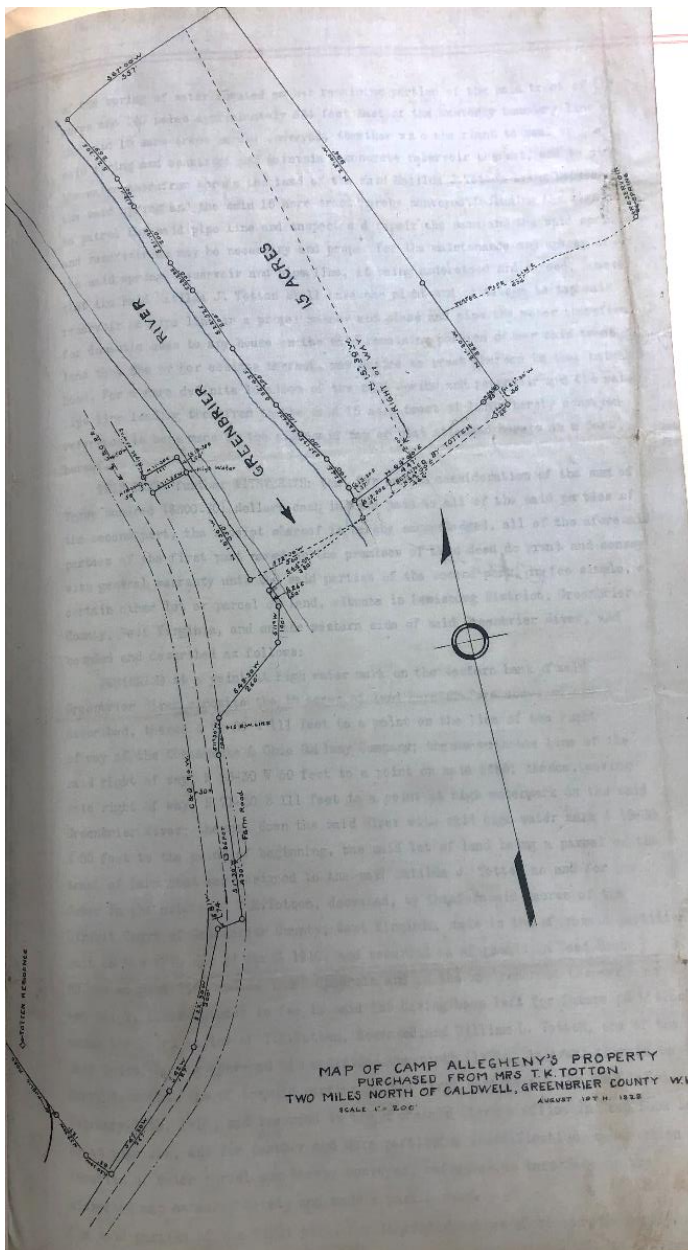


Figure 2. This map shows the original 15 acres purchased by Dr. Walter Hullihen and Professor Hugh Worthington in 1921.

“Dear Girls:

I am looking forward to the coming summer with great eagerness, and I know that you girls who become the charter members of Camp Alleghany will always have a particular warm place in my heart, however dear and fine the girls who come after you may prove to be.

We are planning wonderful times on the Greenbrier River and in the woods, and there is so much that we want to show you that we can hardly wait for the twenty-ninth of June to come. We want to take with you the twenty-five mile canoe trip down the Greenbrier River; to see the famous Red Rock pool; to visit Fort Springs and clamber over its huge boulders. But even better than all these, we want to have together many hours of jolly companionship in dancing, singing, outdoor sports, and working at favorite crafts.

You will find a warm welcome waiting for you, and I know the summer will not be half long enough for all the fascinating things there are to do on the Greenbrier River and in Camp Alleghany itself.

*Sincerely your friend,
Helen Coale Worthington”*



Dr. Walter Hullihen, 1875-1944, Founder President, University of Delaware



Mr. and Mrs. S. Cooper Dawson and Mr. and Mrs. David Henneberg, Co-Directors



Helen C. Worthington, 1880-1929, Founder B.A. Wellesley College



Mr. and Mrs. Glen Barron, Caretakers



Hugh S. Worthington, 1879-1949, Founder



William C. Worthington, Advisory Director

Figure 3. A 1972 camp catalog displays portraits of some of the owners of Camp Alleghany, except the current director and family.

As arriving campers still do so today, the first set of campers and their camp trunks and duffle bags was ferried across the river on a barge. In 1922, this was a Huck Finn-style wooden platform, supported by wooden barrels and attached by chains to a high line that stretched across the river (Figure 4). It was and is one of the oldest extant pole-powered ferries. (The Hatton ferry on the James River near Scottsville, Virginia rivals the age of Camp Alleghany's barge, having been installed in 1870.¹⁰ The origins of Alleghany's original barge are unknown.) The wooden barge was replaced with a World War II-era steel pontoon barge in 1952. According to Alleghany co-owner Bonnie Dawson, "It came by rail in four pieces and had to be reassembled."¹¹

A ferryman named Wheeler Higgenbotham came to Alleghany in 1922 and served in this role for more than 43 summers—until 1965¹², operating the barge to transport campers, mail, food, and sundries, and even trucks. Weighing 375 pounds, Higgenbotham was an iconic fixture at the camp, making up to 75 daily runs across the river during the summer months. He was also known for his uncanny memory: he allegedly could remember every camper's and counselor's name.¹³

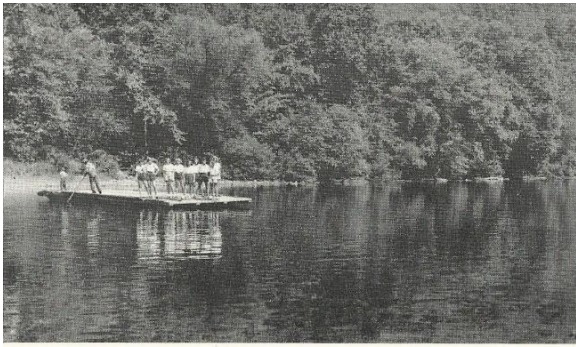
Similar to Camp Greenbrier and many early YMCA camps, Camp Alleghany was designed to mimic a Civil War-era military encampment: canvas sleeping tents with raised wooden floorboards. They were arranged in a square, with a flagpole in the center (Figure 5 and 6), where daily ceremonial flag raising still occurs after Reveille is blown by a public address system that can be heard all over the valley. Tent inspections follow (Figure 7) and Taps, also broadcast throughout the valley, ends the day. A live bugler performed Reveille and Taps for many decades. After Taps, a set of chimes plays soft music to lull campers to sleep. These, too, can be heard throughout the valley.¹⁴ They were purchased and donated by campers in the name of Helen Worthington, after she died in a car accident in

1929. Kerosene lanterns were the common source of light throughout tent row (and still are); electricity was not introduced to camp until 1941.

The Cottage, which originally housed several tenants over the years, became the Camp Alleghany owners' residence. There have been several additions to the Cottage, but the original structure is intact. It is one of the most visible buildings from the west side of the river (Figure 8).

The old barn was torn down, its lumber used by Camp caretaker Arnold Hudgins to build some of the earliest buildings for camp: the Play Hall—an assembly and performance hall, the Junior Crafts Lodge, and the Senior Crafts Lodge—where the girls engaged in arts and crafts activities.¹⁵ A bell affixed to the Dining Hall is dedicated to Hudgins's memory. Heard throughout the valley all summer long, this bell calls campers to meals three times a day.

A train ran through the land along the western bank of the Greenbrier River, across from Camp Alleghany. A station was built in 1923, originally called the Totten Station, but the name was changed to the Camp Allegheny Station in 1940.¹⁶ Campers could hear the sounds of trains chugging along both day and night. It was a passenger and freight line until it was abandoned in 1978.¹⁷ It is now the Greenbrier River Trail, a 78-mile hiking and biking trail.

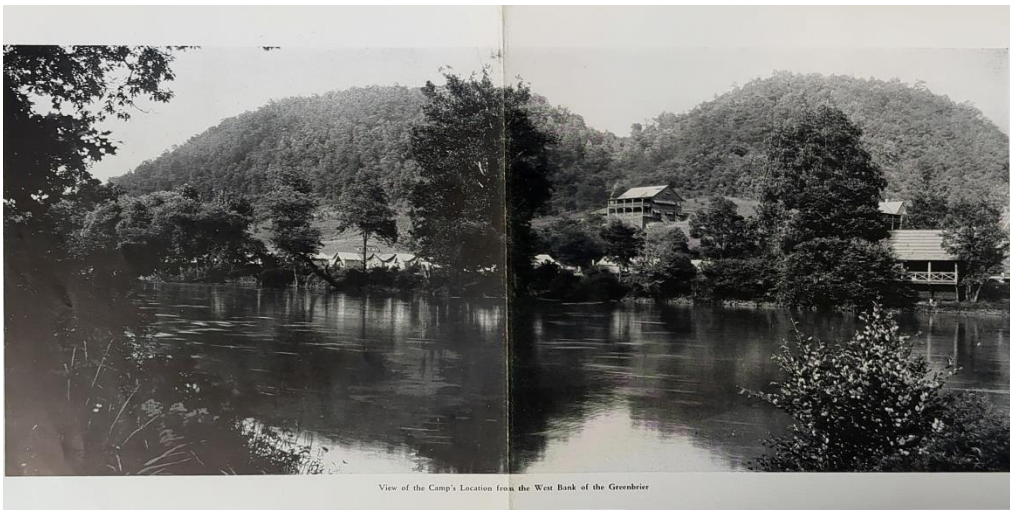


THE FERRY



HEADQUARTERS

Figure 4. This image shows two of the original features at Camp Alleghany when the property was purchased: the owners' cottage and original wooden barge, or "ferry." The camp's owners live in this cottage in the summer.



View of the Camp's Location from the West Bank of the Greenbrier

Figure 5. View of Camp Alleghany from the west bank of the Greenbrier River, this photo appeared in a 1938 camp catalog.

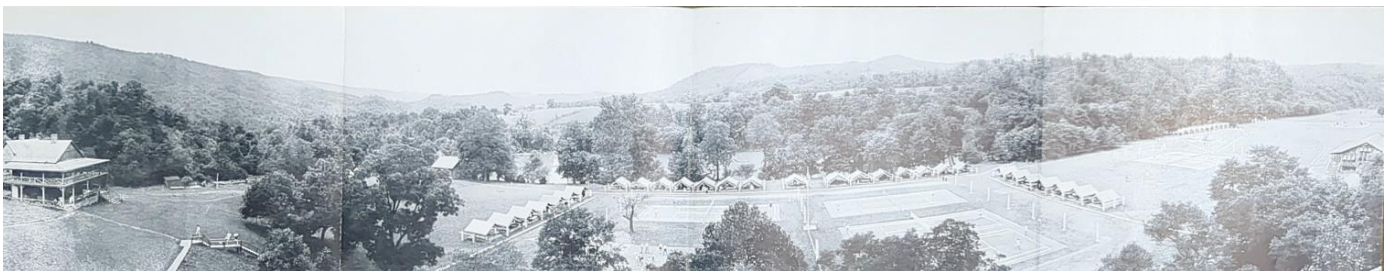


Figure 6. This four-panel panoramic photo of Camp Alleghany, taken from the mountain behind camp, also appeared in the 1938 camp catalog.



Figure 7. Mimicking a military encampment, tent inspection was and still is a daily activity at Camp Alleghany.

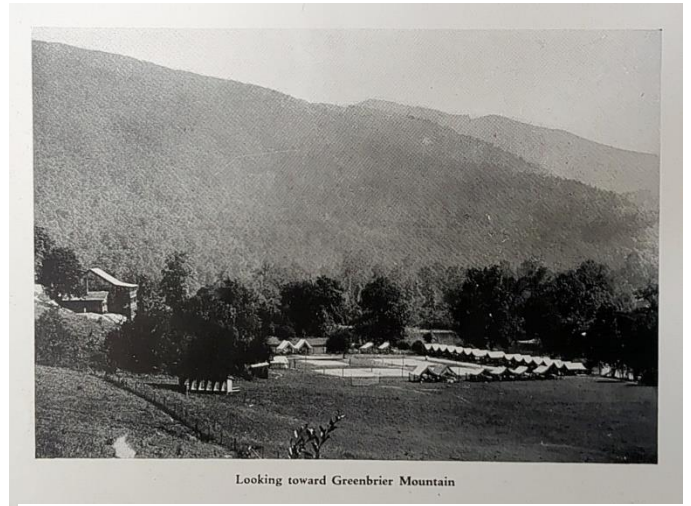


Figure 8. The view of Greenbrier Mountain from Camp Alleghany's Vesper Hill, this photo also appeared in the 1938 camp catalog.

One hallmark of Camp Alleghany was the establishment of a rifle range at camp, headed by world champion rifleman Walter Stokes. Camp Greenbrier boasts a rifle range, so Dr. Hullihen likely encouraged one for Camp Alleghany. Stokes and his sister Helen, also a champion rifle shooter in her own right,¹⁸ coached Camp Alleghany girls to victory in numerous rifle competitions. By 1929, the Alleghany team had won the girls' rifle camp championship of the United States seven years in a row.¹⁹ Certified by the National Rifle Association, riflery continues to be a popular activity at Camp Alleghany. Sounds of rifle shot can be heard from miles away all summer long (Figures 9 and 10).

Built above the camp is Vesper Hill, where a group of campers and counselors cleared the brush and erected a large wooden cross designed by Mr. W.K. Vandulor ("Mr. Van"), the father of a camper.

Figure 10. Riflery has always been a popular activity at Camp Alleghany, dating back to the camp's first summer in 1922. This is a photo of the rifle range as it looked in 1955.



Figure 9. The 1924 Camp Alleghany calendar boasts a photo of the championship rifle team. Note that the faces in this photo, like many others, are all white girls. Most summer campers (unless they were YMCA or YWCA camps) were the domain of white, affluent, Christian girls. Camp Alleghany did not substantially diversify until the 1970s. Today, the camp attracts girls of all races, religions, nationalities, and sexual orientation.



Vesper Hill can be seen from the river and is used for Sunday sundown spiritual, reflective services for campers.²⁰

Another unique tradition at Alleghany was the publication of a newspaper, *The Alleghany Rattler*, originally published about eight times a year for decades and mailed to campers, counselors, and alumnae. It is now electronic and distributed by email.

Campers wore uniforms until the 1930s, costumes with Navy blue skirts or bloomers and white middie blouses adorned with a sailor's tie scarf (Figure 11). Today, campers wear blue shorts and white shirts to dinner, in a nod to the old tradition.



Figure 11. Campers wore uniforms of white “middie” blouses, blue cravats, and blue bloomers like this one until the 1930s.

Alleghany continued operations throughout World War II. Camp alumna (and relative of one of the early owners of Camp Greenbrier) Maria Garnett Hood, who attended Alleghany from 1945 until 1960, remembers when the news of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 reached campers, signaling the war was coming to an end. “Everybody in camp except for me jumped in the river with all their clothes on.” Maria was just learning to swim in the Greenbrier River that summer, so she was merely a spectator. “I stood on the top of the bank in total amazement

and watched these girls going off in their clothes.”²¹

Dr. Hullihen ran the camp with Hugh Worthington until Dr. Hullihen died in 1944, when the Worthingtons bought Dr. Hullihen's interest in Camp Alleghany. In 1947, the Worthingtons' daughter Nancy took over and ran the camp until 1963. Nancy Worthington, a polio survivor, devoted herself to running the camp for almost two decades. “I'll never get rich,” she told the *Lynchburg News*, “but I wouldn't for the world give up the privilege of being with my girls.”²²

The Dawson family bought Alleghany from Nancy Worthington in 1963, when she decided to retire. S. Cooper Dawson had been a camper and counselor at Camp Greenbrier, as well as the previous owner of the boys' camp for a short period of time after World War II. Dawson sold his interest in Camp Greenbrier in 1957. He and his wife Franny ran Camp Alleghany until Cooper's death in 2005, at which time Cooper and Frannie's son Sam Dawson took over as director. He and his wife Bonnie ran Alleghany until 2018, when their daughter Elizabeth Dawson Shreckhise took over as director (Figure 12). The Dawson family has now owned Camp Alleghany for more than sixty years.

Camp Alleghany was accepted as a member of the American Camping Association in 1954 and is accredited by the ACA every five years.²³

“Camp Alleghany is steeped in such rich history and tradition, and it's important to me to retain and honor that history and tradition even over one hundred years later,” says Elizabeth Shreckhise. “While we have moved with the times and incorporated modern business practices using the internet and smart phones and moved away from wearing the camp uniform all day—adjusting some traditions to reflect more appropriate practices

in today’s age, we maintain strong ties to the foundation upon which Alleghany was built: inspiring growth in young women through honor, loyalty, and friendship. Maintaining certain traditions, practices, and customs teaches young women to honor and appreciate culture and tradition in such a fast-paced modern world. Slowing down to reflect on our history and tradition is of paramount importance in our mission and purpose at Alleghany.”



Figure 12. The current Camp Alleghany family of owners: (front row) Noah Shreckhise, Sally Dawson, Louise Dawson, Director Elizabeth Shreckhise, Ellis Shreckhise, Henry Dawson, (back row) Cooper Dawson, Sam Dawson, Bonnie Dawson, Matt Shreckhise, Mason Shreckhise.

The camp has always attracted a significant number of campers from the Virginias, but a small number of international campers has always attended the camp as well. Famous campers include stage and film actress Margaret “Peg” Sullivan and television and film actress Julie Bowen. Journalists Anna Sale and Sabra Ayres attended camp. Novelist Lee Smith allegedly attended. Anchorman Roger Mudd’s daughter and weatherman Willard Scott’s daughters were campers. And one of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s granddaughters attended camp, as well as her Secret Service detail—who “decamped” to a tent at the edge of the camp property.²⁴

Camp’s fortieth anniversary brochure reflected on its decades of success, by stating pride in its tradition of developing young girls “in the principles of sportsmanship, citizenship, cooperation, consideration of others, and meaningful appreciation of cultural and spiritual traditions... For more than one hundred and fifty years people have come to the springs of Greenbrier County to restore their health. In the early days, planters would come to escape the ‘fever’ and ills of the Deep South. Now, parents send their children to Camp Alleghany in Greenbrier County to build healthy characters in a place of quiet and natural splendor.”²⁵

*“Each campfire lights anew,
The flame of friendship true,
The joy we’ve had in knowing you
Will last our whole life through.
And, as the embers die away,
We wish that we could ever stay.
But since we cannot have our way,
We’ll come again some other day.”*

About the Author



Taylor Baldwin Kiland is an author and ghostwriter of military nonfiction. She attended Camp Alleghany 1977-1984 and her daughter, Kiland Hatcher, will attend her fourth season in the summer of 2024.

Notes

¹ Livia Gershon, “Summer Camp Has Always Been About Escaping Modern Life,” JSTOR, April 26, 2016, <https://daily.jstor.org/history-summer-camp/>

² Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, “Why Fear of Big Cities Led to the Creation of Summer Camps,” History.com, August 7, 2017, <https://www.history.com/news/why-fear-of-big-cities-led-to-the-creation-of-summer-camps>; Encyclopedia.com

³ Letter from Dr. Hullihen to Henry Ridgely, May 13, 1920, H. Rodney Sharp Papers, University of Delaware Archives and Records Management

⁴ Richard Lewis and Judith Lewis, and Erin Reibe, Old Stone Manse, National Register nomination, 2002, <https://wvculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Stone-manse.pdf>.

⁵ Author interview with Sam Dawson, Bonnie Dawon, Elizabeth Shreckhise, and Florence Barnick, October 20, 2023.

⁶ An additional 172 acres were purchased in 1935 to expand Camp Alleghany, Greenbrier County Deed Book 124:621.

⁷ Greenbrier County Deed Book 102:81-86, 19 August 1922 from T.L. Totten heirs to Walter Hullihen and Hugh S. Worthington. While the deed spells the camp’s name with an “e,” as in “Camp Allegheny,” the camp has always been spelled with an “a,” as in Camp Alleghany. Camp Alleghany owners speculate that this was intended to avoid confusion with another camp in Louisburg, Pennsylvania spelled Camp Allegheny. Others have speculated that the camp is spelled with an “a” because Alleghany County, Virginia, borders Greenbrier County.

⁸ Anna Worthington Coale, *Summer in the Girls’ Camp*, (New York: The Century Company, 1919).

⁹ “The Pathway of Alleghany,” a compilation of documents created on or around the 25th anniversary of Camp Alleghany in 1947. It has been altered and notated over the years. Courtesy of Camp Alleghany Archives.

¹⁰ Hawes Spencer, “Ferry Tale: Hatton Ferry is not really America’s last poled ferry,” *Daily Progress*, May 14, 2023, https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/ferry-tale-hatton-is-not-really-americas-last-poled-ferry/article_e7e97322-f293-11ed-872f-2be73264a61b.html.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *The Alleghany Rattler*, 1972.

¹³ “Ferryman at Camp Alleghany Has Become Legendary Figure,” *Beckley (West Virginia) Post-Herald*, July 22, 1956, page 9, newspapers.com.

¹⁴ Interview with Maria Hood, conducted by Florence Barnick, October 4, 2015.

¹⁵ “The Pathway of Alleghany.” The Dining Hall was the very first structure built specifically for camp.

¹⁶ Willam Price McNeel, *The Durbin Route: The Greenbrier Division of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway*, (Missoula, MT: Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1985), p. 20.

¹⁷ William P. McNeel, *Greenbrier River Trail: Through the Eyes of History*, (Charleston, WV: Pictorial Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), 20. The Chesapeake & Ohio Railways donated the land to West Virginia in 1980, which created a lineal park called the Greenbrier River Trail, 78 miles long.

¹⁸ In 1923, as a Washington, D.C., high school student Helen Stokes and her rifle teammates “won the Astor silver cup for rifle shooting against the best boys’ high school and prep school rifle teams in the United States and Canada.” – “Sports for Girls,” *Nashville Banner* (Nashville, Tennessee), June 3, 1923, 46, newspapers.com.

¹⁹ “Girls’ Rifle Team Honors Are Awarded,” *Norfolk (Virginia) Ledger-Dispatch*, August 23, 1929, 22, newspapers.com.

²⁰ “The Pathway of Alleghany.”

²¹ Interview with Maria Hood. The only time Alleghany has paused operations during its 100-year history was during the COVID pandemic in the summer of 2020.

²² “Nancy Worthington Inherited Her Love for Outdoor Living,” *The (Lynchburg, Virginia) News*, May 18, 1958, 21, newspapers.com.

²³ “The Pathway of Alleghany.”

²⁴ Email from Bonnie Dawson, January 29, 2024.

²⁵ Camp Alleghany 40th anniversary brochure, Camp Alleghany Archives.

Figure Credits

Figure 1 courtesy of Kim Arbogast McBride; Figure 2 from Deed Book 102. Page 83, Greenbrier County Courthouse; Figure 3 from 1972 Camp Alleghany Catalog, Archives, Greenbrier Historical Society, Lewisburg, West Virginia; Figures 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 from Camp Alleghany Archives; Figure 7 and 11 from Camp Alleghany Album (RRS9C1), Archives, Greenbrier Historical Society; Figure 12 photo taken by Cami Bresee, courtesy of Camp Alleghany.