

Swim Badge

by Lynn McCann



I was going through a box of assorted paraphernalia and came across an old triangular shaped Brownie badge with a picture of a frog on it. *Oh my gosh!* I got so excited! It was my Brownie swimmers badge. What memories came flooding over me at the sight of this little scrap of material.

I belonged to the Salvation Army Brownies, who met at the old hall on the corner of Michigan and Alburni (or First Street as it was known then). It was only three doors down the road from home so I was hardly ever late. We had so much fun at Brownies! Except, that is, for tying that darn tie just right so it was exactly three fingers above our belt buckles.

Brown Owl—Mrs. Roberts on non-Brownie days—was very nice, but there were a few of us that must've been her favourites because she was always calling out our names. No matter where we went, everyone knew that Karin (whose Mom was Brown Owl) and Lynn were there.

I remember Brown Owl and Tawny Owl taking us down to Willingdon Beach one time. We had a wonderful time sitting on logs singing “Here We Sit Like Bumps On a Cedar Log,” “Bingo,” and “There's a Hole in My Bucket,” at the top of our lungs.

The absolute highlight of my Brownie years, however, was going away to camp. We were dressed up in clean and pressed uniforms, ties done just right, brown knee socks (which were down around my ankles most of the time), polished brown shoes, and topped off with our brown berets with the pixie above our right (or was it left?) eyes. We were looking mighty spiffy to go on the ferry down to Camp Sunshine next to the Langdale terminal.

Wow! The camp was huge! We were the first to arrive so we explored the camp while waiting for everyone else to get there. The cabins were wonderful (just like we would later see in the movie “The Parent Trap” with Haley Mills). They were quite large with four steps going up to the door, right in the middle of the front of the cabin. Inside were two rows of cots, one row on each side of the door and, instead of windows, I seem to remember canvas that rolled up or down over wide open spaces.

The cabins backed up to the trees and the bush back there was quite dense. In front of the cabins was a huge field that was bordered on the far side by the cookhouse, dining room, washhouse and lats. To the right of the cabins at the end of the field was a huge Maple tree with benches under it and a big flag pole before it. Beyond the tree was the beach.

By the time we meandered our way near the beach, Brown Owl was getting a little cranky, but I was having a great time teasing her. Sounding exasperated, she said

through gritted teeth, “Why don't you go jump in the lake?” Off I went like a shot for the water! “No! No! I didn't mean it! Don't you dare go in the water!”

I stopped just at the edge of a little receding wave. “Are you sure?” I asked.

“YES I'M SURE!” she yelled back.

“Okay,” I shrugged and pranced back up to her.

I had no intention of going in the water with my uniform and beautifully polished shoes—my Mom would skin me alive if she found out—but Brown Owl didn't know that.

About that time the ferry came in and what seemed like hundreds of Brownies and leaders came trooping in through the gate. It was fun and chaotic while we all got sorted out as to who went to each cabin and we received the rules of the camp. We discovered, to our dismay, that every morning before breakfast that we had to be up, dressed, hair done, bed made *and* our cabin swept out and tidy, ready for inspection. What a lousy way to start the day.

We had to get a broom from the kitchen across the field and take it back again before the inspectors came to see the cabin. While we managed to get the broom to the cabin in time, we never ever had time to get it back. While everyone else was lined up neatly outside their cabins waiting quietly for the inspectors, our cabin group was madly scrambling. At the very last minute, everyone would scoot out and line up while I fired the broom out the back ‘window’ into the bush. Sometimes we even remembered to find it later. Our cabin never ever came close to getting the tidy campers award.

We spent the week doing all sorts of crafts (mine never looked like they were supposed to), playing wonderful games, singing fabulous songs, and having church under the big Maple tree on the benches. That was so special. I think we all were a little in awe of being together under that big tree because no one ever got into trouble while there. I think, too, that it was Brown Owl's favourite place because her forehead never got those funny creases in it while we were there. Another highlight was going to the tuck shop everyday and get candy.

My favourite time at camp was the time a group of 20 Brownies walked two by two along the trail to Hopkins Landing to do our swim test. My friend, Karin and I were at the back of the group when we started out. We started talking about the great big fish at Hopkins Landing with their great big buggy eyes and their great big teeth. We made sure that the girls in front of us heard every word. We moved up one more space in the line. In the new spot, we again started talking about the great big fish with their great big buggy eyes and their great big teeth. Again and again we moved up one spot and began our story once again. By the time we got to Hopkins Landing we were at the front of the line.

The dock was very long and very high and I thought we would have to jump in from way up there, which would be quite exciting but how would we get back up? Just as I was anticipating all kinds of fun ways to get up onto the dock, the leaders ushered us down a ramp onto a float. The float was right on the water and a very long way from shore. We were told that we had to jump in the water, two at a time, tread water for a certain length of time and then swim to the buoy and back. The leaders chose two girls to jump in first, but they wouldn't. Neither would the next two or the next. Only Karin and I jumped in the water, but Karin so freaked herself out with our own silly fish stories that she jumped back out before finishing her test.

I was the only one who went back to camp with the swimmers badge! Poor Brown Owl had deep furrows in her forehead that afternoon.

Years later when I was back visiting Mrs. Roberts with my daughter, I mentioned I had a new title—my name on Wednesday afternoons was now Brown Owl. Mrs. Roberts laughed so hard that tears streamed down her face. "You'll get yours," she said, "You'll get yours!"