

The Spirit of Canyon Camp: Sense of Place and Alumni Memory

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Abstract: Canyon Camp is a Scouts BSA summer camp operated by the Blackhawk Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). Located just west of Stockton in northwest Illinois, Canyon Camp has been providing a lifetime of memories for hundreds of scouts nearly every summer since 1936. In 2021, Canyon Camp celebrated its 85th anniversary and hosted the “Canyon Camp 85th Alumni and Friends Reunion” to bring together staff alumni and others who wish to share in camaraderie and revisit the one special place that evokes the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” for them. Prior to the reunion, a ‘GeoSurvey’ was published to garner responses from our staff alumni in recording geographic information about their hometown origins and place of current residence, which spans across the United States. The maps and statistics produced from this data showcase the geographic extent to which one local place can leave a lasting influence upon former staff alumni across all generations and over great distances. Additionally, coding analysis was completed on archived historical camp documents to dive deeper into how alumni memory helps to paint the context of the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” and the strong sense of place that continues to bring alumni together.

Key Words: Scouts, Canyon Camp, Illinois, Alumni, Sense of Place

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Introduction

Since 1936, tens of thousands of scouts (the youth) and scouters (adult leaders) have come through the iconic Stukenberg front gate of Canyon Camp prepared to experience the week of a lifetime (Figure 1). Canyon Camp is located just west of Stockton, situated in Northwest Illinois as part of the geographically-unique driftless region, which was not flattened by recent glaciation like the rest of the Midwest (Knox 2019). Although originally owned and operated by the U.S. Grant Council of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), today it is managed by the Blackhawk Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America out of Rockford, Illinois. Each summer at Canyon Camp hosts around five weeks of Scouts BSA camping, where scouts ages 11-17 engage in hands-on skills, fun activities,



Figure 1. The “Front Gate” of Canyon Camp, which greets all scouts and unit leaders as they enter camp each week, every summer. Photo by author, 2020.

and work on ‘merit badges’ as they progress towards the coveted rank of ‘Eagle Scout.’ Each week hosts around 125-175 scouts and unit leaders, and offers a consistent, repeating schedule for meals, program sessions, and camp-wide activities for scouts, unit leaders, and staff alike to experience. It is at this camp that I have been lucky enough to spend three summers as a scout and 11 summers as a member of the Canyon Camp staff.

Although most Scouts BSA summer camps operate a similar program structure, each camp has its own quirks, traditions, and activities that distinguish it from others. Canyon Camp has always been known for two key facets: one, going above and beyond for every scout, and two, the spirit and camaraderie of the Canyon Camp staff. Other Scouts BSA summer camps experience higher volumes of scouts each week, thus it is difficult for staff to build a personal rapport with scouts. We have heard countless times over the years from scouts how at other camps, they feel like a number, but at Canyon Camp, staff members know their names and actually care about them. We pride ourselves on how well we get to know our scouts, from sitting with them during meals in the Dining Hall, to putting aside extra time to help that scout achieve that requirement or task they were struggling with.

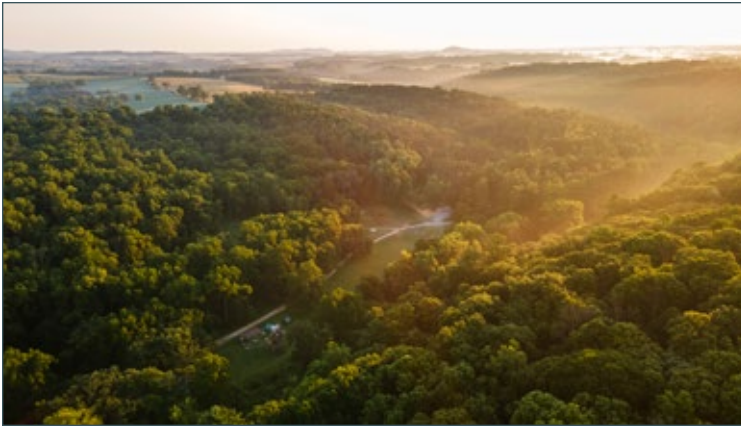


Figure 2. An aerial shot of the ‘Back Forty’ of Canyon Camp in the early morning. Photo courtesy of the Canyon Camp BSA website, 2021.



Figure 3. The Dining Hall, home to delicious meals, enthusiastic singing, and hilarious skits performed by the Canyon Camp staff. Photo by author, 2019.

In addition, Canyon Camp has never been a Scouts BSA camp that receives much funding or support from its operating BSA Council. For the camp staff, it has always been the notion of “what we lack in facilities, we make up for in spirit!” This of course raises the concept of the “Spirit of Canyon Camp.” At camp, we know it as the special feeling that one gets when they are at camp. It is pervasive among our staff alumni, who often make it known how



Figure 4. The ‘Dance Ring,’ adorned with two teepees and the home to our traditional Wednesday visitors’ night campfire, which is symbolic of Canyon Camps’ enhanced sense of spirit. Photo courtesy of the Canyon Camp BSA website, 2021.

much they miss being at camp, or how much they love camp when they are here. This is especially true on our Wednesday visitor’s nights, where the parents of scouts come in to see their children after being gone from home for a few days. Additionally, friends, supporters, and camp staff alumni come in to watch the evening festivities around the campsite, specifically the Native American dancing and the callout ceremony for the Order of the Arrow, Scouting’s honor society.

This ‘Spirit’ pervades in weekly traditions such as the Wednesday evening of serving barbecue dinner to all the scouts, unit leaders, and visitors where the entire camp staff sings camp songs continuously over the course of the entire meal. Most of the songs are reserved in particular for this event, and are sometimes sung in a particular order. The older, more experienced staff lead the songs while the younger, fresh-faced staff try to learn them as they go. This staff group singing is also ongoing during Friday morning’s Paul Bunyan breakfast, as pancakes are being made and served rolled up around a sausage link and coated in cinnamon sugar. The scouts love the unhealthy food, the staff love to sing, and the unit leaders love to listen and feel that ‘Spirit’ of Canyon Camp for themselves as they watch it all unfold.



Figure 5. Seth Kannarr, author and Camp Director, addresses Unit Leaders during a meeting under the 'Big Oak Tree' wearing the 2019 camp design on his t-shirt. Photo courtesy of the Canyon Camp BSA Facebook page, 2019.

Love and appreciation for Canyon Camp is also represented by the camp merchandise scouts and leaders buy and wear from the camp's Trading Post. Experienced scouts, unit leaders, and staff members often wear their collection of Canyon Camp t-shirts throughout the week, and everyone gets excited to see what the new yearly-design will be each summer. This usually is a single graphic that showcases various places and activities at Canyon Camp. The 2021 design featured the front gate, the 2019 design showed a teepee from the Dance Ring (Figure 5), and the 2018 design showed the Camp Bell in a fleur-de-lis outline. Beyond the annual camp-redesign, Canyon Camp has merchandise that uses a perennial 'Camp Bell' logo. Whether it be staff polos, jackets, neckerchiefs, padfolios, notepads, pens, mugs — any Canyon Camp attendee will recognize the decades-old 'Camp Bell' logo anywhere. Many Scouts BSA troops will take photos with the Camp Bell, to help remember their week at Canyon Camp.

The 'Spirit' of Canyon Camp is heightened and showcases its influence every five years at Staff Alumni and Friends reunions. These reunions take place at the end of the camp summer on a weekend, and all Canyon Camp staff, alumni, and supporters are invited to participate in talks and presentations, enjoy meals and



Figure 6. The 'Camp Bell,' the iconic symbol of Canyon Camp and a practical tool for daily wake-ups, mealtime reminders, and emergency signals. Photo by author, 2020.

camaraderie together, and reminisce about their time at Canyon Camp. For some, it can be a first-time return to camp fifty years after serving on staff, and for others, an experience they refuse to miss each time. For the current staff serving that summer, it can be almost overwhelming to meet the legends of Canyon Camp's past and try to absorb all of the stories and memories being shared. The alumni not only tell stories and share memories about how camp was for them, but also of how great and exciting Canyon Camp seems to be now. They want to learn from the young, current staff about their experience and share sage wisdom that they can use in their own journey and development while at camp. As one can imagine, these events are exciting and meaningful to all who attend.



Figure 7. Canyon Camp staff alumni from the 1950s and 1960s at the 85th Alumni & Friends Reunion in July 2021. Photo courtesy of the Canyon Camp BSA website, 2021.

Since Canyon Camp was established in 1936, the year 2021 marked the 85th anniversary of Canyon Camp and a particularly significant Staff Alumni and Friends Reunion from July 23rd-25th. This research began in 2020 as a pet project during the Planning Committee meetings and has evolved into an analysis of how the phrase the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” has geographic context and meaning. Additionally, it speaks to the significance of reunion events and geographic concepts such as ‘sense of place’ and ‘place attachment’ to the camp. The following sections detail the fruits and labors of these efforts and analysis following the success of Canyon Camp’s 85th Staff Alumni and Friends Reunion.

Background

From the perspective of a geographer, this “Spirit of Canyon Camp” seems to be representative of ‘sense of place’ and ‘place attachment.’ As a location, Canyon Camp is unique and special to so many people, who have feelings of nostalgia and pride for Canyon Camp and its summer program and traditions. Additionally, the repeating reunion events every five years indicate a form of ‘reunion tourism,’ a unique type of tourism that emphasizes the emotional connections between people and places.

The term ‘place’ is a simple word with a complex backstory and deep significance to human geographers (Seamon and Sowers

2008). It differs from 'space' in that we occupy and live in space, but we find human meaning and significance from a 'place' (Relph 1976). People form attachment to specific spaces, and we turn spaces into places when we attach meaning to them (Tuan 1977). To look at 'place' is to describe human or physical characteristics of that particular space and identify what makes it important or unique compared to other places. Additionally, sense of place, also known as place meaning, refers to how people feel about a particular place. Sense of place or place meaning can be subjective, personal, and informed by one's own experiences.

Sense of place has been used as a tool to assist in engaging communities to take action on issues, and studies have found that the greater an individual's sense of place, the greater their commitment and involvement is with the place (Axford and Hockings 2005). Sense of place writings also show that positive place meaning for people contributes to increased place-benefitting behavior (Stedman 2002). Additionally, examples of community activism and creative practices help to increase positive place meaning in urban areas, suggesting a positive correlation between community involvement and sense of place (Buser et al. 2013). This sense of place tends to be temporary, as place meaning is not always automatically accessible in memory as assumed; therefore more recent visitation to a place draws stronger feelings of sense of place (Bugden and Stedman 2019).

Sense of place is particularly applicable to discussions of Canyon Camp in that staff alumni and supporters utilize their own feelings and memories of camp to engage in reunion events, volunteer for work days, or donate money towards important projects to improve and benefit the camp property and program. For these people, Canyon Camp is not just a space, but an important, meaningful place for which they experience an intrinsic attachment.

Sense of place plays hand in hand with place attachment, suggesting emotional links between humans and places are common (Hernández, Hidalgo, and Ruiz 2020). This has been well studied in the field of environmental psychology for decades, and is becoming increasingly relevant to human geographers looking at relationships between people and places (Lewicka

2011). Place attachment shows up in cultural expressions of art, music, customs, and local traditions (Smith 2002). Similar to the relationship between community involvement and sense of place, place attachment to one's neighborhood seems prerequisite for participation in neighborhood events (Zhu 2020).

Place attachment is in full effect for most active Canyon Camp staff alumni. There are many Scouts BSA camps around the United States, and dozens just in the Midwest. Alumni feel an emotional bond to Canyon Camp only, and this is often best described as being the "Spirit of Canyon Camp" instilled into everyone who has experienced the wonders of this place. Discussions of shared experiences, memories, and demonstrations of emotional attachment often come up at big alumni events like the quinquennial Staff Alumni and Friends reunions.

With tourism, people tend to follow 'the tourist gaze' and seek to travel to destinations that are different and unique from the places they routinely experience in their daily life (Urry 1990). Just as many people travel for recreation, academic conferences, or business meetings, some travel to attend homecomings, reunions, or anniversary celebrations. In particular, homecoming events tend to be much larger in scale and draw interest from alumni of their alma mater institutions. Alumni who attend these events experience heightened levels of satisfaction and place attachment after visiting and participation in the events' programming (Zhang et al. 2018).

The concept of tourist satisfaction and 'savoring' is also relevant, in that the goal of these get-together events is often to make visitors enjoy their experience and have positive emotions about it for as long as possible (Yan and Halpenny 2019). This visitor satisfaction leads to feelings of place attachment, as it fuels loyalty to the place, event, or group that the reunion event is centered around (Lee, Kyle, and Scott 2012). Place attachment and loyalty is especially relevant to university homecomings and sporting events, where increased attendance and loyalty leads to increased fundraising for the organizations or places that host the events (Kirkup and Sutherland 2017).

In the case of Canyon Camp's 85th Staff Alumni and Friends Reunion, the main motivator for attendees is that of nostalgia. Just as nostalgia drives university alumni to engage with university

events, former staff, scouts, and leaders feel driven to revisit Canyon Camp on account of their own memories and experiences (Green et al. 2021). Many alumni no longer live in close proximity to Canyon Camp, and thus they must travel great distances in order to attend the weekend event. Their past at Canyon Camp fuels these sensations of sense of place, place attachment, and nostalgia that we know as the “Spirit of Canyon Camp.” This feeling drives staff alumni to come to the reunions and engage with the camp community once again at the place many call home.

Methods

In preparation for promotion of the 85th Staff Alumni and Friends Reunion, I had proposed to the Planning Committee a plan to create a “geosurvey” to capture former and present location information for each consenting staff alumni. I started with using Google Forms, and inputted a list of questions for survey respondents to answer. These questions were accepted by the committee prior to survey launch (Table 1).

In creating the survey questions, it was important to us to keep parallelism in questions and format between current residence and original residence. The four scale levels of nation, state, county, and city were asked for both current residence and original residence. This would allow me flexibility in deciding how to best display the locations on a map, as separate maps could be made for each of the scale levels. Beyond the basic contact information, we found value in asking questions about their generation of birth, their years of experience on the Canyon Camp staff, and others to just have the data for any potential points in which we may choose to explore.

After closing survey data collection and cleaning up the dataset in Microsoft Excel, I began to create maps with ArcGIS Pro software. I used the base maps provided by the software, and did table joins to integrate the Excel data into the attribute table for the various maps to be created. I decided to create choropleth maps, which use vector polygons and fill them in within a color gradient or defined scheme. The target audience of these maps was originally for the Canyon Camp staff alumni at the 85th Reunion, so simple, visually appealing maps were the priority. I used U.S. state borders

Table 1. Geosurvey for Alumni and Friends

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1. What is your Email address?
 2. What is your First Name?
 3. What is your Last Name?
 4. What is your approximate Generation grouping by year of birth?
 5. How many Years did you serve on the Canyon Camp staff? (Provide # answer please!)
 6. Which Decade(s) best fits with your years of service on the Canyon Camp staff?
 7. Are you currently serving on the 2021 Canyon Camp staff?
 8. Which Staff Positions did you serve as during your time with the Canyon Camp staff? (Example: Handicraft CIT, Kitchen Aide, Nature Assistant, OWL Director, etc.)
 9. What BSA Unit were you part of when you joined the Canyon Camp staff? (Example: Troop 206 or Crew 1936)
 10. Which NATION did you originally live in when you worked on the Canyon Camp staff? (Example: United States)
 11. What STATE did you originally live in when you worked on the Canyon Camp staff? (Example: Illinois)
 12. What COUNTY did you originally live in when you worked on the Canyon Camp staff? (Example: Jo Daviess County)
 13. What CITY did you originally live in when you worked on the Canyon Camp staff? (Example: Stockton)
 14. What is your current OCCUPATION? (Example: Middle School Teacher, Graduate Student, CEO, Manager at Menards, Retired, etc.)
 15. Which NATION do you currently live in now, as in your permanent address? (Example: Canada)
 16. Which STATE do you currently live in now, as in your permanent address? (Example: Ontario)
 17. Which COUNTY do you currently live in now, as in your permanent address? (Example: Durham County)
 18. Which CITY do you currently live in now, as in your permanent address? (Example: Toronto)
 19. Do you plan to attend the 2021 85th Canyon Camp Alumni and Friends Reunion ongoing from July 24-25th this summer?
 20. Have you visited our new Canyon Camp staff Alumni and Friends webpage? (<https://www.canyoncampbsa.org/alumni>)
 21. Do you have any other information/thoughts/questions to share that may be relevant to this GeoSurvey project?

and county outlines as my polygons of reference, and then did a table join with the processed Microsoft Excel survey data for each individual map to be able to display each variable by choice in the choropleth map.

In addition to the survey questions and map data, textual analysis was conducted from archived historical documents on the Canyon Camp Alumni website to find more evidence of the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” as being indicative of sense of place and tied to alumni memory. Twenty-five documents, ranging from written letters to speeches, were read through and analyzed, looking for quotes with descriptions of the place of Canyon Camp and mentions of the “Spirit of Canyon Camp.” These quotes were coded to help categorize the responses and provide insight into the consistent and various ways that the alumni view Canyon Camp. Specific codes were created based on the main points presented by the alumni, and similar codes were combined together into categorical codes that seemed to best represent the ideas shared by the authors of these documents.

Results

The ‘Canyon Camp Staff Alumni GeoSurvey’ was launched on February 16, 2021 and was available until July 20th, 2021. 215 total responses were collected, but only 198 complete and non-duplicate responses were utilized for analysis (Table 2).

Respondents had a total sum of 939 years of cumulative experience on the Canyon Camp staff, with an average of 4.74 years per staff member. Canyon Camp has a very high staff retention rate compared to other Scouts BSA summer camps. Our historic average hovers around four years, and this is the basis for when we provide a clock gift to our “Old-Timers” who are honored at the end-of-summer staff dinner for their four summers of service. We attribute this high staff retention rate to the strength of our program and the valuable experience, growth, and development it provides for our staff members. Although it is hard to quantify, we believe that the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” keeps bringing staff members back to Canyon Camp.

Table 2. Number of alumni and number of years on the Canyon Camp staff.

Staff Years	# of Alumni	Staff Years	# of Alumni	Staff Years	# of Alumni
1	24	6	20	11	2
2	36	7	7	12	2
3	32	8	8	13+	3
4	28	9	5		
5	23	10	5	TOTAL	198

Table 3. Number of alumni per decade of service on the Canyon Camp staff.

Decade	# of Alumni	Decade	# of Alumni
1950s	5	1990s	45
1960s	16	2000s	46
1970s	39	2010s	56
1980s	42	2020s	9

Table 4. Number of Staff Alumni per age generation

Age Generation	# of Alumni Responses
The Silent Generation (1925 - 1944)	7
The Baby Boomers (1945 - 1964)	56
Generation X (1965 - 1979)	43
The Millennials (1980 - 1999)	85
Generation Z (2000 - 2019)	7

This group of alumni represents a wide time range of historical camp background (Table 3). Although the obvious trend is that the number of more recent alumni would be higher, there is a nice balance of alumni between the 1970s and the 2010s. Of course,

there is a steep drop looking at the 1960s and then the 1950s, and the 2020s should be very low due to no Scouts BSA summer camp in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 and just the summer of 2021 having happened so far in this decade. Over time, camp leadership, events, and traditions change. The staff alumni that served in the 1950s and 1960s experienced a very different camp program than the staff alumni from the 2000s and 2010s. Denny Pratt, who is legendary at Canyon Camp, served as camp director from 1968 until his death in 2003. The legacy and influence of this man is in part how we define how camp functioned in these decades, and this is when modern camp traditions and our notion of the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” began. Staff alumni from before the 1970s have some valuable insight into the past and development of Canyon Camp as we know it today, and this question hits right at the heart of why staff alumni reunions are so important for our camp community to learn about the past and reflect on the present.

The results of Question #4 portray a similar demographic trend to that of Question #6, but differ in conclusion. Some staff alumni began their staff tenure at age 14, while some may start as an adult. Although the age generation boundaries are flexible and subjective, the distribution of the numbers here offer a glimpse into the culture of what these staff alumni were like and what the world was like when they were growing up (Table 4). The Baby Boomers, for example, had the majority of its members work on the Canyon Camp staff between the 1960s and 1970s. Going even further back, it was the Silent Generation that was serving on the camp staff during the 1940s and 1950s, experiencing the effects of World War Two on Canyon Camp. There is not much documented in regards to Canyon Camp history in the 1940s, as scouting shifted focus to supporting the war effort with collection drives for metal, for example. It was the Baby Boomers and Generation X that experienced Denny Pratt as camp director, while the Millennials have experienced the tenure of Lee Binkley and Dick Reynolds as co-camp directors in recent years. Of course, we have very few Generation Z members in these results, as this group is still very young and not actively engaged as staff alumni yet. To understand these staff alumni well is to consider the context of how life was for

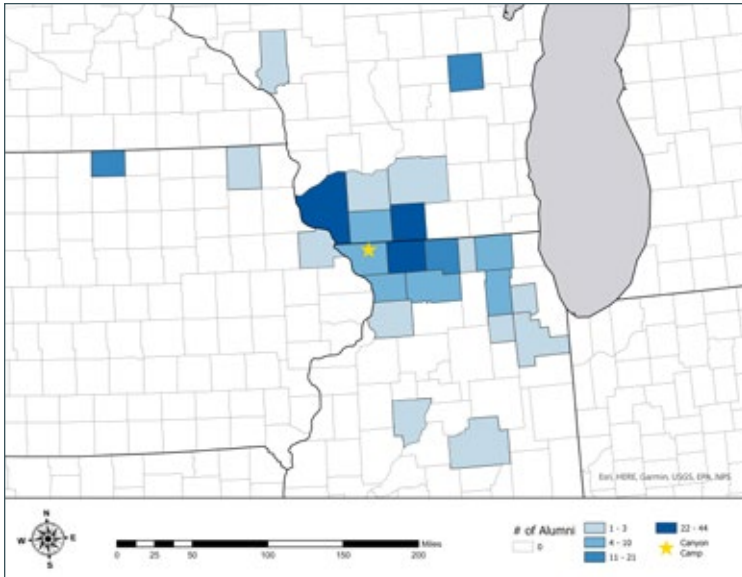


Figure 12. Canyon Camp staff Alumni and Origin by U.S. County, in the Midwest. Map created by Seth T. Kannarr in August 2021.



Figure 13. Canyon Camp staff Alumni and Origin by U.S. County, across the U.S. Map created by Seth T. Kannarr in August 2021.

these men and women during their time on the camp staff, and this question helped to loosely provide this context.

Since Canyon Camp is located in Jo Daviess County of northwestern Illinois and most Scouts BSA troops attend their local summer camp, most staff members come from local Scouts BSA troops who live in Northern Illinois or Southwestern Wisconsin (Figure 12). This camp has strong ties to Freeport, Illinois, and its surrounding communities in Stephenson County, thus the high concentration of staff alumni from there. Additionally, the city of Rockford, Illinois, has the highest population in the Blackhawk Area Council and has dozens of troops that are active in Winnebago County. Similarly, Grant and Green Counties in Wisconsin have high numbers due to the cities of Platteville and Monroe, whose troops are almost all regularly at Canyon Camp each summer.

Although Canyon Camp has deep roots in these five counties, staff alumni have also come from far away U.S. states. Outliers include the two counties in Texas and Florida. These data points are due to staff alumni who eventually moved away from the Midwest. Out of love for their experience at Canyon Camp, these parents brought their children to be scouts at Canyon Camp. Eventually they served on the Canyon Camp staff as well. Because of this, some say that the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” transcends generations and geography.

Survey participants live in many U.S. states. There are also outliers from outside the United States — such as Canada, South Korea, and Tanzania. The subtle message and story provided by this map is that the influence and legacy of Canyon Camp lives on not only across thirty U.S. states, but even worldwide (Figure 14). These results were impressive, with a large geographic range of camp staff alumni engaged in the survey process.

In order to more deeply look at sense of place and Canyon Camp, textual analysis was conducted on the twenty-five archived historical documents from the Canyon Camp Alumni website, with the results providing twenty noteworthy quotes pulled from eight historical documents. With these twenty quotes, seven interpretive codes were assigned to categorize the intent and mindset of each response. Of these seven interpretive codes assigned, four were

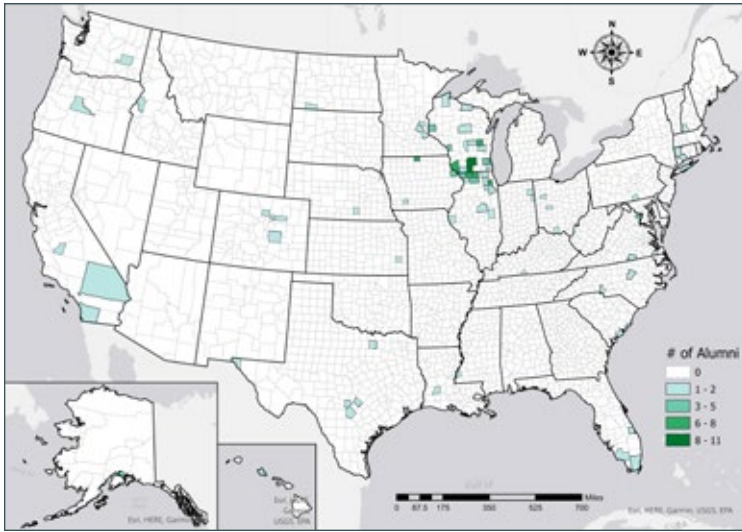


Figure 14. Canyon Camp Staff Alumni and Current Residence by U.S. County. Map created by Seth T. Kannarr in August 2021.

most prevalent above the rest: ‘Emotional,’ ‘Legacy,’ ‘Place,’ and ‘Aesthetic’ (Table 5).

The ‘Emotional’ code was assigned to responses that invoked emotion in their description of camp or of a story about camp or camp personalities. This could include writing about one’s love for camp, religious feelings and peace, a sense of awe, or even a healing sensation from being at Canyon Camp. One notable quote from an archived document named “The ‘Spirit’ of Canyon Camp,” written by Canyon Camp staff alumnus Don Barry in 1973 states: “Once you’ve opened your heart to Canyon Camp, you become a permanent part of its surroundings.” This suggests that Canyon Camp as a place becomes personal when you open yourself up to it, that one can become invested by doing so. Another quote from “Genius Loci,” written by former Canyon Camp director Lyle Novinski in 2006, argues: “There was medicine, strong medicine in this place, and it is with wonderful irony that the Rawleigh Cabin is named for the family that gave it.” For additional context to this quote, Mr. Rawleigh of the Rawleigh family was a doctor, thus the irony. More importantly, Novinski describes how being at camp can be like a healing experience. Just like a medicine can be healing, being at camp can help one get through whatever troubles

Table 5. Results of content analysis codes assigned to each quote.

Codes	Count	%
<i>Total</i>	41	100
<i>Aesthetic</i> Beauty, Landscape	5	12.2
<i>Emotional</i> Love, Nostalgia, Awe, Healing	10	24.4
<i>Function</i> Role, Operations	2	4.9
<i>Individual Growth</i> Personal Development	4	9.8
<i>Legacy</i> History, Influence	9	21.9
<i>Spirit</i> Representation of the Spirit of Canyon Camp	4	9.8
<i>Place</i> Uniqueness of Area	6	14.6

or stresses one is experiencing in life. It is only natural, through the nostalgia of alumni, that ‘Emotional’ responses top the results.

The next most assigned code is that of ‘Legacy,’ which was given to responses that reference the eighty-five year history, traditions, and memories of Canyon Camp. There is usually a time component to these responses, especially how Canyon Camp as a place is a constant while generations of people grow and move through it. Another quote from Lyle Novinski’s aforementioned “Genius Loci” reads: “Lives lived on this land have overlapped in the continuation of purpose for these seventy years. Scouts grew to staff men, staff men layered in the next.” This clearly highlights two concepts: that Canyon Camp offers a continuing purpose for which has remained true over time, and that people come in as young scouts and grow up over time to become staff members and eventually adults who send their children to camp too. Another quote from J.R. Swenson’s 2011 “Tribute to Lyle Novinski” writes: “It’s odd that a single place like Canyon Camp should have such an influence on so many of us during our formative years and that that influence was so

overwhelmingly positive.” This once again highlights the idea of scouts growing up at camp and leaving with positive takeaways. It also notes that the phenomenon is “odd,” hinting that this is atypical compared to other places.

The third most common code is that of ‘Place,’ which was assigned to responses that get at the idea that Canyon Camp, as a particular location or area of land, is unique and or special. A quote from Bill Determan’s 2011 “Tribute to Lyle Novinski” writes:

“Over the years I have returned to Canyon Camp more times than I can count. Ron Spielman and I have discussed many times the fact that coming through the twin pillars at the gate to Canyon Camp is like going through a time warp. The outside world does not penetrate the barrier formed by those pillars. For us it is a return to the memories of our youth and the spark that was ignited in those brief few weeks we spent at Canyon Camp with Ski.”

This highlights the uniqueness and unchanging nature of Canyon Camp, that only this place can serve as a portal into the past and an exclave of the real world for them. It hints at nostalgia as an operator here, providing a powerful response.

The final code is that of ‘Aesthetic,’ which is given to responses that are pointedly describing how camp looks, usually with positive terms of endearment such as “beautiful” or “being struck” by what one sees. A quote by Don Barry’s aforementioned “The ‘Spirit’ of Canyon Camp” reads:

“The physical beauty of the camp itself. While the buildings at camp may appear old and worn out, the land areas of the camp are quite beautiful by themselves. The sweeping parade ground, the canyon wall overlooking the dining hall, the forested campsites and meandering Coon Creek — all combine to create an environment that is easy to love. The land itself whispers that strength of character and peace of mind may be found within its boundaries.”

Of course, the author directly describes Canyon Camp as beautiful, and he details the relationship between the built and the natural. The author also ties in an emotional response in how the

appearance of the landscape hints at “strength of character and peace of mind.” Additionally, he points out how the buildings in camp appear old, worn out, and unchanging. This I can attest to, in that many alumni from long ago come back to Canyon Camp decades after their attendance as a scout, and say something along the lines of “Wow, this place looks just like when I was here as a kid!” Staff and volunteers maintain the buildings to be the same classic brown color in order to keep the cultural landscape as unchanging and authentic as possible. In a way, Canyon Camp has its own form of aesthetic, and that is part of what makes Canyon Camp as a place, special and unique.

Discussion and Conclusion

The 85th Canyon Camp Staff Alumni and Friends Reunion was a successful event with over one hundred alumni, friends, and supporters of Canyon Camp in attendance. After a tough summer dealing with COVID-19 guidelines and the threat of the camp being sold as part of the bankruptcy of the Boy Scouts of America, this event was the highlight of the summer for the camp staff. As Canyon Camp experiences many leadership transitions prior to the summer of 2022, this was a critical moment for the community to come together, share memories, experience camaraderie, and reflect on the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” that binds it all together. Revisiting camp renews those feelings of sense of place that drive alumni to come back and support camp. The results of the GeoSurvey demonstrate the expansive geographic reach of Canyon Camp staff alumni across the United States, and highlights the significance of the community and the influence Canyon Camp has had on each alumni. Additionally, the coding analysis identifies that staff alumni who have written about Canyon Camp focused on four themes: emotional, legacy, place, and aesthetic. These serve as indicators of how the “Spirit of Canyon Camp” has touched the lives of camp’s community members. The sense of place at Canyon Camp is very strong, and has helped shape a strong, rich community of dedicated scouters and alumni who love their home summer camp. Canyon Camp has a bright future ahead, and the “Spirit” will continue to touch the lives of the many generations of scouts and scouters to come.

This research demonstrates how a place can have an intense presence of sense of place, place attachment, and alumni memory. A place does not have to be world-famous or significant to the general public, but could mean everything to a small niche of people dedicated to a particular place. There are more of these widely-unknown places than there are well-known places, and each of us can think of places in our own experience that may be very important to specific groups of people and not to the public at large. This project could serve as an example of how to explore these liminal spaces in geographic literature.

About the Author

Seth Kannarr is a Geography Ph.D. student at the University of Tennessee, working with Dr. Derek Alderman. His research interests are focused on place renaming and protected areas such as National Parks. Seth has served as an adult volunteer with the Boy Scouts of America since 2015, and has served on the Canyon Camp staff for 12 summers. He can be reached at stjkannarr@gmail.com.

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