

## **CAMP HISTORY: 1948-1964**

The seeds of Wente Scout Reservation (originally called Willits Scout Ranch and then Willits Scout Reservation) can be traced back to the summer of 1948. For it was that year that the Oakland School district, needing a large location for two new hill area schools, started condemnation hearings on 28 acres of land (a mile south of the Montclair shopping district) owned by the Oakland Area Council. The land in question was that of Camp Dimond, the first Scout camp of the Oakland Council that opened in 1919. Camp Dimond was the main camp for almost 30 years where weekday, weekend and summer camp activities took place. Camp Dimond also served as the location for the council office for over 15 years. When Camp Dimond was forced to close its' doors forever in 1948, only the undeveloped Ranchos Los Mochos (acquired in 1945) near Livermore and the summer operations at Dimond-O (acquired in 1925) outside of Yosemite remained as the camping areas for the Council. A new summer camp was needed.

Due to the growth explosion of Scouting in the 1950's and its expected continued growth, the Oakland Area Council required a new site for a summer camp to supplement its camping operations at Dimond-O and Los Mochos. However the Council did not begin searching for a new site in earnest until 1957. From 1957 until 1959 the Council investigated multiple large acreage sites (both north and south of the Bay Area) as potential locations for the new camp.

One of the sites for sale was the Foley Ranch located in the hills East of Willits. The ranch site offered a large piece of property (1,928 acres) at a price the council could afford. Council members considered it to be the most desirable location it had found. The site was also investigated by the engineering service of the National Boy Scout Council that gave its full approval for the ultimate development of three separate camps, each camp serving 200 boys on the site.

The engineering study also showed that a 50-acre lake would be feasible in the future and that adequate supplies of water are available from springs. The study indicated, "The natural springs on the property can serve much of the site in the immediate future by gravity flow. Power and telephone lines are already in the area, allowing for immediate use. The altitude of the property ranges between 2,000 and 2,300 feet and includes fir, pine, oak and other varieties of native trees".

In July of 1959 the Board of Directors of the Oakland Area Council and President Robert Matheison approved \$70,000.00 for the purchase of the ranch land (about \$37.00 per acre) and the Willits Scout Reservation was born. The first order of business for the council was to make a complete topographical map of the property and determine it's long-range development plans. This process would take several years but wilderness camping on the property would begin immediately.

The first "encampment" at Willits Scout Ranch took place on October 24 & 25, 1959 when more than 300 Scouts and their leaders attended a special weekend campout. For the first trial run of the camp, a Scout troop was selected from each of the ten districts within the council. After the five-hour car trip from the bay area, Scout troops arrived Saturday morning and were guided to their campsites by members of the council executive staff including Scout Exec Frank Dix. After setting up their camp, the Scouts explored the new camp and found an abundance of nature, open meadows, massive oak trees and many deer. During the day some of the scouts measured the mighty oaks by seeing how many scouts it took to surround the trees. At the camp-wide council fire Saturday night, all Scouts participated in the building of a stone cairn to mark the spot where the first ever campfire was held in the history of the camp. Each Scout's name was included on paper scrolls that were placed inside the cairn to be preserved for posterity. Note: Although we have not been able to confirm this, it is believed that the cairn and its contents now lies under 20 or 30 feet of water near the chapel as this is near where a small pond used to reside.

In August of 1960 a geologist from Berkeley was consulted to investigate the proposed dam site and look at the geologic make-up of the area. The one-day visit investigated the location of the

embankment type of dam and the rock formations within the dam area. The geologist noted, "The bedrock at the dam site is well exposed in the stream channel and in outcrops on the abutments. The bedrock in this vicinity is the Franciscan formation of Jurassic age (about 150 million years) which is the oldest rock of the Northern California coastal ranges". The geologist in his report goes on to say, "the broad flat valley forming the reservoir area should provide ample impervious material for the embankment".

For the next couple of years not much took place other than occasional camping and site visits by the executive staff taking tours and planning the development of the camp. In September of 1961, the Durant Plumbing Company of Oakland donated the first sailboat to the camp, a small wooden Sabot Type 2 sailboat, although any semblance of the lake was still on the drawing board and over two years away. The Sabot was the number one dinghy for teaching beginners to sail. Later the camp would acquire six El Toro sailboats for the scouts to learn sailing. Both the Sabot and the El Toro sailboats looked similar but the El Toro featured a small deck over the bow that made the El Toro handle rougher waters.

When the ranch land was first purchased a number of old buildings were located on the property where the lake now stands as well as near the family camp area. Most of the buildings (used for small logging operations) were torn down during the construction of the dam and the lake area. Only the medic's cabin (a small two room shack) located about thirty feet in front of the existing director's cabin and the ranch house (an "L" shaped building) located at the end of the auxiliary parking lot remained until the late 1970's. Before the dam was in place the main road across the meadow crossed in front of the peninsula, where the Chapel is located, and exited near the dining hall. The small road that is used as a boat launch that can be seen in front of the dining hall is the last remaining portion of the main road that crossed the meadow.

The original drawings for the camp called for three separate camps known as Camp A, Camp B and Camp C. Each camp would be large enough to accommodate 200 Scouts (although that limit has been pushed to over 600 Scouts and Scouters in recent years). Camp A would be the main camp that surrounded the lake. Camp B was to be located on the west side of Eagle Summit in the upper meadow area. Camp C was to be built on the East side of Eagle Summit between Tan Oak Cathedral and Mellow Marsh/Haunted Springs where the lodge pole climbing outpost once resided and the overnight corral outpost now camps. Both Camp B and Camp C would have swimming pools and areas for eleven troop campsites. Each camp was to be self-sufficient but lack of funds did not allow for these other two camps to be built. However full color drawings for the secondary camps still exist and are quite fascinating to look at and ponder what it would have been like with three camps. The camp rivalries and competitions would have been great. Additionally at the entrance to the camp off of Canyon Road was to be a family camping area as well as maintenance buildings.

In October of 1961 members of the Oakland and San Lorenzo Rotary club donated \$15,000 in materials and labor to construct the first two major buildings at the camp, the Admin building and the trading post/commissary. The admin building would be constructed with a shingle roof, plywood interior and a wide front porch. The building would also contain a small kitchen, shower and toilet facilities. The main room of the building would be used for both staff dining and office tasks. A fifteen foot addition to the building in the late 60's would add a staff shower house, first-aid room and camp office to the east side of the building. If you look at the cement porch and the roofline you can see where the original building stopped and the addition was added. Although the interior of the building has changed much over the years, the outside of the building looks the same as it did in 1961. The other major construction project was the building of the camp trading post/commissary (today's Handicraft building). This building was built in an area that was central to the camp at the time. If you explore the handicraft building you will notice that the side that faces the Scoutcraft area has pull-up doors, as this was the trading post for the camp. The side that faces the lake is where the Scouts picked up their food and supplies for the Jamboree style cooking. The back of the building that faces site 4 (Sky High) was the loading dock.

At the beginning of 1962, 100 Scouts from the Central District of the council led by Scout Commissioner Roger Day planted over 500 redwood trees on the southeast corner of the lake. This area was to be a picnic grounds for the parents of the Scouts. If you look across the lake a number of those trees are still thriving today and some of the metal containers that shielded the trees can be found lying around. A few months later the camp began to take further shape as Kaiser Steel of Oakland donated 5 tons of metal pipe that would be used to lay the lateral water lines for the three camps. It is unclear if any of the water lines for the two other proposed camps were ever laid. However walking from the location of Camp C down to Haunted Springs you can find metal water lines along side the hill. It may be possible that some of the lines to the springs were laid in anticipation of building the other camps.

In May of 1962 the Berkeley geologist made a final visit to the dam site to obtain samples of the fill materials for testing. During this visit, an eight-foot vertical cut was made into the road that paralleled the creek as well as a seven-foot trench was dug in the valley where the fill material would be "borrowed". This material showed it to be a uniform gritty silty clay that tested excellent as a fill material.

In April of 1963 with the "Specifications for Construction of Scout Lake Dam" complete, the council sent bids out for the building of the dam. The expected cost of the dam and the necessary grading was estimated to be around \$93,000. The dam would be 51 feet high, 290 wide and ultimately hold back 386 million gallons of water with an 80-acre lake. Over 9000 cubic yards of material would need to be excavated and 62,000 cubic yards of fill material borrowed for the completion of the dam. The maximum depth of the lake would be 46 feet at which point water begins to flow over the spillway. The elevation of the spillway is listed as 1,921 feet above sea level while the original creek bed at the bottom of the lake is at 1875 feet. A funny aspect contained within the specifications for the dam is in Division "C", Section 7 – Guarantee of Work. The camp had a one-year guarantee on the failure of the dam against any defects in workmanship and inferior materials. The water from the lake would be used as the drinking source for the camp through a filtration plant to be located below the dam. The water would be pumped up to two 100,000-gallon redwood tanks on the hillside above the lake and gravity fed to the campsites. The lake created by the dam would be the largest on the West coast created specifically for Boy Scout aquatic activities.

Two months later on June 10, 1963 with the construction bid process closed, over 200 people (including William Knowland publisher of the Oakland Tribune, who was in charge of the fundraising efforts for the new camp) attended the gala groundbreaking ceremonies for the dam and also the completion of the trading post and commissary building by the Rotary Club. Construction of the dam would commence immediately to ensure the camp was open for the 1964 season. The building of the dam also required the removal of some small buildings and numerous oak trees that were located within the area of the soon-to-be lake. The waterfront area had to be graded and conditioned for swimming and aquatic use. The dam, spillway, bridge and new main road would be completed in the fall of that same year.

On October 31, 1963 the single 18 inch diameter flood gate to the dam was closed-off and the small beginnings of the lake driven by the various springs and winter rains began to backup behind the dam. It would take two full winters for the lake to reach its capacity and overflow the spillway into Boy Scout creek below the dam. Although the lake would be ready for use by summer the completion of the campsites still had a long way to go. By December of 1963 only two campsites had been completed and five more still needed to be built.

During the first months of 1964 a major change took place at the council that had been in the works for almost four years. On February 10, 1964 atop Yerba Buena Island, the flags for the Oakland Area Council and the San Francisco Council were lowered for the last time during a ceremony where the two councils merged and the San Francisco Bay Area Council flag was raised. With the raising of the SFBAC flag there now were six camps in the united council (Dimond-O, Los Mochos, Camp Loomer,

Willits Scout Reservation, Camp Royaneh and Camp Lilienthal). With the cost to operate so many camps the two undeveloped camps at the Scout Reservation (Camps B & C) were dealt a deathblow and would never be built.

In June of 1964, 16 years after the closing of Camp Dimond, Willits Scout Reservation the newest camp of the Oakland Area Council (now the San Francisco Bay Area Council) opened for its first summer camp. During the first summer, there were only seven campsites to choose from (Big Dipper, Wishbone, Sailor's Rest, Sky High, Madrone, Moss Shadows, and Sunrise Ridge). The new 80-acre lake featured an aquatic program of rowing, canoeing, small boat "handling", swimming, and lifesaving instruction. Troops would cook their own meals Jamboree style using wood burning shepherd stoves with menus and supplies picked up daily at the commissary.