Part 2 – Stories of Tallulah Gorge

By John Simpson

When I came back to camp in 1972 as the director, Coach Mike told me that things had changed considerably in the gorge and that there were people in the bottom nearly every time we went. Therefore Y campers had to wear suits the majority of the time. After I had been at camp for several weeks I led one of the gorge hikes and we were using the short route (Wallenda). Upon Coach Mike's instructions, I sent several supervisors ahead of us to see if there were any groups down there swimming nude. The morality of the 60's was still in force in the 70's and quite often there would be mixed groups swimming with no clothes on. I sent the supervisors ahead and waited for them to come back. I believe I had something like the pioneer unit and we sat down on the trail and waited and waited for the supervisors to come back. They didn't come back. The more I waited the madder I got. So I went storming down and then I realized why they didn't come back. The campfire girls out of Toccoa were on Slippery Rock swimming nude. The supervisors forgot that we were even back there and probably could have cared less.

One of my gorge stories concerns Coach Mike. It was "the thing" to have some of the old Navy shorts. These were khaki shorts that had a buckle, were very short, and had wide leg openings. Coach Mike had a pair of these on and as we were walking into the gorge he spotted a yellow jackets nest. He told everybody to stay back and I was behind him and he searched for a stick that would fit into this hold and close out the exit of the yellow jackets. As he was bending over to stick the stick into the hole, he didn't realize that there was another hole coming out behind him. His shorts were filled with yellow jackets, which was a temporary situation, as he left his shorts there on the trail and went ahead.

Another of my stories concerns the Castronis family and this was young Mike. It was one of those summers when it seemed to have rained every other day and we were running out of days and his unit had not been to the gorge. On one of the last days which was a drizzly, overcast day, I told Mike at breakfast, "Take your group into the gorge today." His expression was priceless however he didn't say anything. As soon as they left Stuckey's the bottom dropped. Some of you might remember that around 50 yards past Stuckey's there was one place that was very dangerous. This was a pine tree that only had about 2 feet of dirt on the gorge side of it. There was no way to get to the right of the pine tree so we had to go to the left. The supervisors and leaders would have to hand the boys around this tree and on this particular day it was even worse because the ground was nothing but mud. Anyway, Mike's group got to the bottom of the gorge, it continued to pour down rain, copperheads were being flushed out of the nesting places and swimming along with the boys. When they reached Slippery Rock it was hard to recognize the rock because so much water was going over it. I don't know whether Mike has ever forgiven me for sending him up on that hike or not.

During Coach Mike's last five or six years it became "the thing" for him to take every gorge hike. He, at times, would take two hikes a day but he wanted, and insisted upon, taking all of them. His last couple of years, he was having to come to Athens for chemotherapy. I have never had chemotherapy, but people tell me that it will make you as sick as you have ever been in your life. The only time I ever made Coach Mike do anything was the last couple of years when he was taking these trips to Athens for

the chemo. He would do all of the things that he normally did for the morning program, get in his car, drive to Athens, get the chemotherapy, and be back for rest hour. I finally made him take a supervisor with him. This was a waste of time because day after day I would see Coach Mike drive back to camp with the supervisor sound asleep in the car next to him. But even during this time, he insisted on taking every gorge hike that left the camp.