

I BLAZED THE TRAIL

Reflections of my two years at TrailRidge Mountain Camp

30 years later...

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The four words at the top of this page were imprinted on some camp materials and maybe on some shirts and brochures as well. However, these words are more than just a catchy slogan. These words have a great deal of meaning for me and for a small group of boys who are now men, many I am sure now have children of their own. I have wonderful memories of Trail Ridge and I am proud to say that "I BLAZED THE TRAIL!!!" Thirty years ago in 1982, I was part of an intrepid group of brave young souls who were given the unique experience to "build" a new camp. The first year was more memorable as we suffered torrential rains and slept in tents. Year two was vastly different because someone had the bright idea to move us into cabins and to provide proper bathroom and shower facilities. (What were they thinking???)

I recall that Mark Levin came to a local school auditorium in New Orleans and pitched this new camp concept to a bunch of kids and parents. If you look at the original camp brochure which was used in Mark's "recruiting" efforts (recruiting which would make today's military proud by the way), you will find that it included basic details and the following jewels: No Bathrooms just port-a-potties, No showers just black H2O solar bladders, No cabins just small tents, No dining hall just an outdoor kitchen, and FIVE hours of work per day for each camper! All of this could be had for the bargain price of only \$50 per week. Back then my parents thought this was a wonderful opportunity. In today's world it is called illegal child labor or perhaps a boot camp for troubled youth!

All kidding aside, it was one of the best experiences of my childhood. I had attended a traditional summer camp in Nashville the year before with the cabins, lake, horses, craft hut, regimented schedules, and everything else you see in a movie about a summer camp. TrailRidge was very different. I remember that we had schedules for eating and sleeping times when in camp, but most of the other activities and event options were announced at breakfast and we were allowed to run and sign up for the activity that interested us most. It really allowed you to "choose your own adventure" in a manner of speaking. It is a concept that I miss and wish was available at the traditional Camps my very own children attend now. I regret that I cannot send them to TrailRidge. That would have been incredible.

My camp memories are typical of those forged in a young mind, some fuzzy and some very clear. Please forgive me if all the details and locations described herein are off a little. I was only 11 in that first year.

I recall a day where Mark asked for volunteers to seek out a site in the woods to become the new Outdoor Chapel. I believe only one or two of us signed up for that, but remember that we did find a great site and more kids signed up when it was time to work on the site. We had a number of services there which included Mark and a banjo if I remember correctly. All who were there in year one will also recall the large board at the foot of the main trail to the tent sites with nails in it which held a yellow hard hat with each camper's name on it. This was clearly intended for use during the work details. I believe camp staff also used as sort of a check in and check out board to see if everyone returned from details. I do recall a scavenger hunt one night that all participated in. One of the items on the list of things to find was Mark's Yellow hard hat and this was likely the only item that only one camper could locate and turn in. That yellow hard hat had been "lost" by Mark. Oddly enough, I "discovered" Mark's hat hanging on a tree at my group's tent site and having found that item along with the other items on the list, was proclaimed winner of the scavenger hunt!

We will all remember "bug Juice" and the fine outdoor dining. Not long after our arrival that first year, the dining hall was completed and our dining experiences improved. One of my least fond memories was a work detail where we carried buckets of rocks or gravel up the main trail which led to the tent sites and laid the rocks in an effort to give us something less muddy walk on when coming down the hill. It rained a lot in the first year and I remember that trail being a small creek most of the time! I also remember falling on my butt several times when coming down the trail on a rainy day.

The memories of the outdoor experiences stick out the most. I spent quite a bit of time as an older teenager and as a young adult on the AT and in the mountains in general. I even headed for the mountains for my honeymoon and still tend to take the family to the mountains every year or two. Keep in mind I hail from a city which is as flat as a board and was built below sea level. The highest natural point in the city is a small man made hill which probably lies at about 10 or 15 feet above sea level!

I credit Mark, Bobbie, and the other camp leaders for lighting this fire in my heart for the mountains. The fact that I now own a Solar Business can likely be traced back to the "solar" showers we had at camp. Those showers were my first experiences with solar! I clearly recall the process of preparing for overnight trips where we lined up all of our backpacks and divided all of the common items among us to even out the weight. I recall learning how to make a temporary shelter with a plastic tarp thrown

over a rope tied between two trees and the four corners tied off to the ground and the process of using a monkey ball, or dirt ball, at the corners to have something to tie to the tarp and not have it tear.

I improved my skills at collecting wood and at building fires. I learned why we needed a portable shovel for our backpacks. It had something to do with the old saying of “does a bear #&# in the woods”. I cannot vouch for the bears, but I know that we did! I taught many things I learned at camp to Cub Scouts as an adult when I was Cub Master of my sons’ Pack. We actually had over 75 boys enrolled in that Cub Scout Pack when I retired from that position. I credit the unique adventures I offered them for the increased enrollment and know that those were a direct result of what I was taught at Trail Ridge.

I remember listening to “noises” on a section of the Appalachian Trail which crossed the road not too far away from the camp entrance. I do not know if these noises were dogs, echoes, or the Indian ghosts that the hiking leaders claimed they were, but I do remember them vividly. I recall trips to Roan Mountain and large games of ultimate Frisbee in the fields near the visitor center of Roan Mountain. I remember rock climbing trips to Hound Ears Rock. I remember “multi-state” overnight cycling trips in year two, although we probably started the trips only a few miles from the state line! I think one of my favorites was an overnight hiking trip in Linville Gorge and swimming in Linville Falls. Other trips included a visit to sliding rock in Pisgah Forest and a visit to some of the museums or centers along the Blue Ridge Parkway. We even went on a tubing trip down some river which I guess may have been something like the French Broad, perhaps. Another memorable trip had a group of hikers dropped off on the top of Mt. Mitchell and we hiked down and, I must say, the experience was likely much better than if they had decided to have us start at the bottom and work our way up! I also remember that rightfully, we were asked not to bring candy, sodas, or other things to our camp sites. One trip outing gave us an opportunity to stop at a small store and I distinctly remember rolling can drinks up in my blue foam sleeping pad and stashing them in a creek when I returned to camp. Ah...the joy of a cold soda after a hot day at camp with only water and juice offered as refreshment! Mark will have to forgive my transgressions!

Looking back now, I find it amazing that I recall all of these adventures in such detail. It is more amazing that I participated in all of these adventures, and likely a few I do not recall, in only two summers. It further amazes me that all of this was provided to me in such a short time frame. The funny thing about it, I cannot recall many of the campers from my time there. I only remember a couple of faces seen in the photos on the website. My cousins attended with me in year one and I can pick out a name or two

from the first year camper list that I recall. I would love to hear from those who were in the tent or at camp with me in year one. I believe we were called "Junaluska" or something like that.

My cousin Beau Lambert stayed in that tent with at least two or three other kids and a counselor. My other cousin, Hutson Lambert, stayed down the trail a ways in a tent with slightly younger campers. Please get in touch if you remember any of us or stayed in the tent with us. We would love to hear from you.

Again I must state that this was a wonderful experience for me. Mark, I am sure, cannot remember everything about every kid that has passed through his care over the years, and even those who are fortunate to continue to learn from him to this day. I did take interest in the fact that those short travel adventures he is leading these days involve overnight stays in hotels. Even fearless mountain men get old, eh Mark? I must say, however, my memories of him and the experiences that I had thanks to him and his staff will stay with me for the remainder of my days. These experiences shaped my idea of what adventure truly is and gave me an appreciation for nature and the outdoors that is hard to gain when you live in a large city. I have been proud to try to share some of those lessons and experiences with my family and with other young folks I have had the chance to teach in my life. I am grateful to Mark and to TrailRidge for enriching my life, and for making me a better man because of it. **I BLAZED THE TRAIL!** Consider yourself lucky and blessed if you did too!!!