

LORD SOMERS' CAMP 1967

R.W. ANDERSON REPORTS ON THE LORD SOMERS' CAMP

The following impression of Big Camp 1967 was written by Rod. Anderson (Brighton Grammar) Light Blue Group. This article is re-printed by permission of the Editor of "The Brighton Grammarian".

As we waited to depart from Flinders Street on the special train which was to take us direct to Somers, it was, to say the least, amusing to watch the return of those who had attended the first camp. I mean, what could make one hundred sun-burnt but haggard looking young men want to charge up and down the plaza whooping and yelling in a frenzy, quite regardless of the comments and bemused looks of the city crowd? Speculation on their sanity and their true ages ran high, and most of us sat there in the clouds quite certain that we would never be reduced to such a state. Within a week, our attitude had been radically changed.

To say that Lord Somers Camp is ideally situated is almost an understatement. It reclines fifty yards from the clean sands and clear water of Westernport Bay upon a tidal creek which is both wide and deep enough to accept the vainly flailing limbs and bodies of campers thrown with a double somersault from the heights of the old wooden bridge. Around a centrally placed circular lawn lie the group huts, the slushies quarters, administration buildings, main hall, radio shack (the camp has its own propaganda system, Radio Somers), printing press, open-air theatre and other pieces of what is virtually a self-contained city.

So much for the tourist attractions, but, without being long winded, could I briefly summarize the aims of L.S.C. and its metropolitan affiliation, Power House? Founded in 1929 by Baron Somers, then Governor of Victoria, as a memorial to those who died in the 1914-18 War, its purpose was to bring together young men from every walk of life (industry, all schools and training institutions, Legacy, St. John's Homes etc.), and to strengthen co-operation and understanding between them. Needless to say, no mods, sharpies, stylists nor associated social vermin exist there. There are free-for-alls, but no grudges, no bitterness, so strong is the bond of unity and the feeling of team-identity that is upon you before you realise it.

The generation of the remarkable atmosphere and spirit depends to a large extent upon a highly imaginative and organized day to day sporting competition, between the five groups. Apart, perhaps from the training schedules of revolutionary football coaches, the "sports" competed in could be found nowhere but at Somers. Each of them is of necessity a team competition; in each of them the emphasis is not on inherent skills or abilities, but on initiative, speed, and above all, endurance; each of them involves the loss of large amounts of pride and skin. After a morning of sport your free afternoon on the beach is very welcome, particularly if on the previous night you have fallen victim to the Slush.

The Slushies, under their King, Duke and Hierarchy are the spearhead of the Somers fellowship. They are the constant scourge of the groupers, lurking dangerously in the background, at times concealing and at times realising in swift and violent action their sworn oath to degrade and humble us. They will make you laugh-and laugh you will at their frequent stunts and farces for among them are highly trained and practised comedians.

Conversely you will curse them, you will in fact want to kill them, and had you a gun you would, for their surly mocking facade conceals months of training in tortures at which the Inquisition would have paled. The Slush respect no one, save their King, and at times even this veneer wears thin; men of the calibre of Governors, Knights and Lord Mayors have been humbled, but have later joined ranks and the ever-present Slush.

If these lines have conveyed even a small part of the atmosphere of Somers I shall be surprised, for when you try to describe something like the Somers spirit you realise the fearful inadequacy of words. The spirit of that place is almost beyond the comprehension of an outsider- it is something beside which the feeble support which we dare to call School Spirit pales into insignificance. On our return to Flinders Street, we didn't feel in the least embarrassed or juvenile when for five minutes we stopped city traffic with an ear-splitting Slushie war cry atop the newly erected Flinders Street plaza, for from the week at Lord Somers Camp we had gained something never to be lost.

If you are fortunate enough to be selected to go, do not pass the opportunity by -- the loss would be yours and it would be great.

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Lord Somers
Power
14 June

WHY I FOUNDED THE SOMERS CAMP

(Reprint of article written in 1933 by Lord Somers)
By courtesy of the "Herald" Melbourne.

Today is a Red Letter Day in the lives of many past and present members of the Somers Camp and the Power House - the twin organisations founded by Lord Somers while Governor of Victoria. In the following article, Lord Somers, who has returned to take part in the life of the Camp, which opens today, describes its origin and aims and gives a full account of the ideas which inspire this movement.

Our camp at Somers opens today for this season, and I am glad to have this opportunity of explaining at some length the purpose and ideas behind this movement, and of our hopes and aims for the future and for what may come of it in the years ahead.

The Camp which bears my name has its origin in a movement that was begun in 1921 when the Duke of York started his summer camp for boys at Littlestone Aerodrome in England. These camps were in the nature of a social experiment - the Duke's original idea being to use camp life as a means of bringing together boys already engaged in earning their own living with other boys of their own age, but differently brought up and looking forward to different careers, and who had not yet started on their life work. His hope was that by joining for a short time, while they are still young, in intimate companionship, in living together and in sport and games, the two sets of boys might become one set, with a common understanding, and with mutual appreciation of each other.

There were no more ideal circumstances than camp life for such an experiment. The boys played together, fed together, sang and bathed together, slept in the same quarters, living all day and in everything on an equal footing, and with no thought of artificial social distinctions.

Well, that experiment proved to be a tremendous success, and though begun on a small scale, it soon grew and developed. Ten years later it had become an important factor in the life of the country. It was seen that the Camps were breaking down the wall and bridging the gulf by which the boys were normally supposed to be divided. It was found that these divisions melted away under the atmosphere of camp life and, thanks to the loyal and public spirited co-operation of the boys themselves, the whole thing became an unqualified success.

I have been deeply interested in this movement and, as is well known, during my term as Governor of Victoria. I was able to get a similar camp started here - I am glad to say with equal success.

Now I want to say something about the spirit and the organisation behind these Camps. In the first place, they are not a welfare movement, though they do undoubtedly result in the boys benefitting from the open-air-life. Nor are these Camps designed with any material motive. Our aim is to change and improve the mental attitude of the boys to each other - to beget a state of mind in which the two sets merge in each other. As the period of the Camp is short - only one week - every effort is made to give the boys full scope for recreation and play. We do not wish to give them a busman's holiday and saddle them with numerous domestic duties, and so they are free of nearly all these, and can devote the whole of their time to themselves. We wish, too, to give them absolute freedom, with as little hampering discipline as possible, and so long as the simple rules of the Camp, such as punctuality at meals and so on are observed, they can do what they like. The Group Leaders take charge of the organised sports, and as each group is composed of boys from both school and workshop, unity is preserved. Superficial differences in worldly prosperity vanish at the Camp; you can't tell one from t'other; a feeling of comradeship in a common life manifests itself; a spirit of loyalty to each other, and to the ideals behind the camp quickly emerges; artificial barriers tumble down, and we are all one.

That, in brief is the spirit of the Camp.

But, of course, that is not the beginning and end of it, for if it were, the benefit would be merely temporary, and the effects would pass off. And so I come to the other and, to my mind, the more important function of the movement which finds expression in what we call the Power House. The Power House is a continuation of the Camp. Every boy who attends the Camp becomes automatically a member of the Power House. The Camp is the Open Sesame to the Power House, and whereas in the Camp the boy has merely enjoyed himself, when he graduates to the Power House he begins to imbibe the spirit of service and to learn that he has responsibilities, both to himself and to others.

The Power House has already taken concrete form in the shape of a building in the Albert Park which constitutes a sort of headquarters where everybody can meet and discuss plans, and where the boys who have been through the Camps are able to meet again and to renew old friendships, and thus lay a permanent foundation for the future.

As each year one hundred boys attend the camps, and they then pass on into membership of the Power House, there is a sort of snowball accumulation, with our numbers increasing year by year, thereby attaining great numerical influence in the community and greater

strength to pursue the ideals born of the Camps.

In the Camps the first barrier of reserve is broken down; in the Power House former strangers have become firm friends, working together in the common cause.

What is that cause? Quite briefly, it is to spread the spirit of the Camps throughout the community, to wipe out blind prejudice and to banish strife, class-consciousness and misunderstandings.

We want to widen the outlook of the boys and enable them to look beyond their present limited horizons - out over the Big World outside, so that they may realise that Australia is a part of the great British Empire.

Our course, the work has hardly begun yet. It is too early for concrete signs of progress, though we have made considerable headway among the young already. But, after all, our first batch of boys are youngsters no longer; they are growing up now, and in the years to come their influence will make itself apparent. We look to the future for our reward, and for the ultimate success of the scheme.

It is perfectly obvious that for the success of the plan we must catch our material while young. It is of no use trying to change the mentality and outlook of a grown man with set ideas, but boys are plastic and open to new ideas, and we now have sufficient experience to see that the idea behind the Camps is based on sure and sound foundations.

It is astonishing what extraordinary changes can be brought about, even in the space of one short week. Not only do these chaps derive great physical benefit from their stay down there, but a subtle, though none the less unmistakable change, comes c'er the spirit of the scene. Here you have a gang of good fellows suddenly becoming aware that the other chap is a good fellow, and that like the Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady, the public school boy and his cobber from the factory are both alike under their suntanned skins. They have played together, made merry, worked for their respective groups and, what's more each has played the game. And what more can you want?

All this is taking place at a very critical period in their lives - a period when opinions are formed; impressions are made, and when life-long ideas are gained. And subsequently at the Power House these impressions are confirmed and become part and parcel of the youth's outlook not only on life but on his fellows.

Members of the Power House remain members until they go to the grave, and that membership increases year by year with, I hope, increasing results for good.

Well, there is the idea behind the Somers Camp and the Power House, and I believe that it is an idea which will commend itself to most people.

In our original schemes we hoped to form a small endowment fund for the running of the yearly Camp, but times were bad, and it seemed inappropriate to approach people for that purpose. Consequently, the current expenses of our organisation have to be found in a very haphazard way. If, by any chance, these lines should meet the eye of anybody in a position to help us put our finances in decent order and reduce our overdraft, it would be of tremendous value to us, and relieve us of our anxieties in this respect.

I should not wish to conclude without an appreciative reference to the extraordinary goodwill, valuable assistance and enthusiastic co-operation which we have received during the years we have been engaged in building up the Camp and Power House to their present proportions. It has been made possible by the generosity of a few Melbourne citizens, but the value of the Camp is more than the money that has been put into it. In asking for that money, and for that assistance, and in securing a personal and unselfish services of many leading people - men of character and prestige in the community, whose own personal influence is our greatest asset - I realise that I accepted a grave responsibility. I felt when I had completed my tenure of office that this was my legacy to the State, and it is this that has brought me back to Melbourne again, to see how the good work was progressing.

I must confess that I experienced a lively pride and satisfaction in seeing such a splendid result from an organisation with which my name is so intimately connected. The work has not yet come to its full fruition. That will come, but I believe that future generations will reap the harvest of the seeds that have been planted, and that we shall not have worked in vain.

SOMERS.