THE BAR-49 RECREATION RANCH

 PREFACE

 Adolescence has been noted by scientists, including Margaret Mead and others, to be one of the most formative, yet potentially turbulent, times during the process of growing-up and character formation. The nature of a child’s experiences during this critical period can do much to scar or benefit the personality, outlook, confidence, and self concept that person develops in later life.

 Looking back on those years in my own life, I was extremely fortunate to have been one of the many kids who experienced the wealth of positive memorable experiences being a “camper” at the Bar 49 Recreation Ranch summer camp, in northern California, near St. Helena. Having found virtually nothing written about this fantastic summer camp of the past, I offer the following description based upon my experiences there in the mid-1960s, with the purpose of refreshing those memories in other Bar-49ers and in the hopes that they will write and share their experiences with us. For those who shared these wonderful experiences, these words and photos will take you back and put a smile on your face.

 INTRODUCTION

 The Bar-49 Recreation Ranch was an exceptionally memorable nonprofit summer camp for boys and girls, from 6 to 15 years old, that operated from the 1950s through 1970s in the picturesque Chiles Valley, just to the east of the wine country setting of Saint Helena, California.

 While it was originated in 1949 by motivational writer and speaker Charles Simmons, who bought the 1,025-acres Chiles Valley property to start a summer camp for children, the “golden years” of the Bar 49 were under the stewardship and vision of owner Edward Alvin Keith, who financed improvements to the property in the 1950’s and then bought out the other developers in the 1960s.
Golden Years

Ed Keith’s aim was to build a recreational summer camp for children that was, in some ways, much like a recreational school for boys and girls from all socio-economic backgrounds to learn about ranch living, horseback riding, boating, fishing, water sports, archery and arts and crafts, while enjoying the co-educational camaraderie and fun of campfires, dances, and group activities.

Description of the Bar 49 Ranch and its Activities

Physically, the Bar-49 Recreation Ranch summer camp was organized around several physiographic features. In terms of activities, the daily round of the campers would be much like a school for fun with three activity periods in the morning and three in the afternoon, reporting to various activity areas of the ranch per each individual camper’s schedule, for swimming, sailing, horseback riding, archery, rifle range, arts and crafts, and nature study.

The Lodge. The Lodge was a long single story ranch-style building situated on a hill overlooking the camp and the Lake. It was topped by a bell which could be heard from everywhere in camp ringing out the times for rising, breakfast, for the three activity periods in the morning, then lunch, then the three activity periods in the afternoon, dinner, and campfire or other evening activity sessions before turning in for the night.

The west end of the Lodge central area contained the cafeteria where the campers would eat their three meals a day, at a table with their cabin mates. Food was generally of good quality.

The east end of the Lodge central area contained a large rock fireplace and provided the setting for indoor evening activity sessions, including dances.

The rear of the Lodge consisted of a long hallway lined with small residential rooms where the rest of the workers, such as the camp nurse, laundry...
and other camp workers, resided. The director and owner resided in a set of rooms at the west end of the Lodge on the other side of the cafeteria.

*The Canteen.* The far eastern side of the Lodge contained a large service window counter that, when opened, served as the "Canteen," where campers could on special occasions purchase rare specialty items, including candy and pink popcorn bars. This was adjacent to the gravel parking lot, which was the connection to the ranch gate to the road and the outside world. This parking lot was where parents would bring their cars to drop off new campers at the beginning of each session and pick them up at the end of the session.

*The Green.* To the north and downhill from the front of the Lodge was the central hub of the activity areas of the Bar-49, a large flat lawn area the size of a football field which was called The Green.

*South Green.* The Lodge Assembly Area. The area immediately in front of the Lodge was an assembly area consisting of a flat grassy slope where campers would assemble for group photos, instructions and speeches by the director and camp counselors and occasional group prayers.

*Central Green.* Directly downhill from the Lodge below the slope was a large flat grassy lawn area which was the Green itself.
The Pool. In the center of the Green was a concrete slab area surrounded by a white wood fence which contained the camp swimming pool, and a pool house which had the laconic sign which said something to the effect of "We don't swim in your toilet, don't pee in our pool." This provided the location for lessons during swimming period, which led to certification for various levels of swimming achievement and life saving. When the fence was dressed up with bamboo pole torches and palm leaves, it served as the locale where Hawaiian Luau night festivities were held.

West Green. The Bandage Barn/Laundry Room and Counselor’s Lodge. The west side of the Green was bordered by two buildings. The "Bandage Barn" or Infirmary, was the nearest to the Lodge, with the uphill half consisting of the Laundry Room. Downhill from it was the Counselors’ Lodge, which was a refuge where counselors could hang out, play guitar, and socialize when they were off duty or to get away from their kids, and hence it was "off limits" to campers.
The Rifle Range. The Rifle Range was nestled in a wooded area behind the West Green buildings, and consisted of a covered area with mattresses from which children would learn supervised marksmanship shooting .22 caliber rifles at targets wired to hay bales.
East Green Buildings. The Arts and Crafts Building and Girls Shower and Bathroom. The east side of the Green was lined by two similar buildings. The Arts and Crafts building nearest the Lodge was the site for arts and craft period, where campers could learn various fun arts and crafts, including weaving vinyl whistle and key holders, cut and paste, building popsicle stick cabins, leaf and flower pressing, and a variety of activities that were limited only by the imagination of the counselors. The downhill twin building was a girls’ area bathroom and shower building.

Campers Cabins. The campers and their counselors resided in primitive plywood A-frame cabins segregated into the girls’ area and the boy’s area.

Girls’ Area Cabins. The Girls’ Area cabins were situated in a wooded area to the east of the Green and girls’ area bathroom building.
Boys’ Area Cabins. The Boys’ Area was situated to the north and down the road from the girls’ area and down the road towards the Lake, behind a gigantic oak tree. The boys’ area had its own cinderblock bathroom and shower building which looked much like the girls bathroom and shower building.

Each cabin had a door at one end and a horizontal opening plywood “window” at the other, with flat plywood bed benches on each side upon which were set six total mattresses for each camper, and one at the far end, for the counselor. Thus, each cabin housed 6 campers, 3 beds on each side, and the counselor, whose bed was at the far end. The cabins were grouped by age grades.
The Lower North Green: Campfire Circle. Near the Boys' Area, on the downhill border of the North Green, the lawn area gave way to a short slope and another flat area with a view of the Lake to the north. In the middle of this area was a large campfire circle consisting of several rough hewn logs and stumps which served as seats that surrounded the central campfire. After nightfall, the counselors would stoke the campfire, and the campers would be called by the ringing Lodge Bell to "vespers" at the Campfire Circle, with counselors who had musical talent typically playing songs in the flickering shadows of the dancing flames, which the campers typically joined in singing. The songs included many popular songs of the time, including cowboy songs, such as Ghost Riders in the Sky, Maria, Strawberry Roan, Cool Water, and folk songs, such as Peter, Paul & Mary's Puff the Magic Dragon, If I had a Hammer, Blowin' in the Wind, and the Kingston Trio's Sloop John B, Tom Dooley, MTA, and Jamaica Farewell. These experiences sparked many a campers' interest in singing and learning to play guitar.

The Lake and Adjacent Activity Areas. The Lodge area was connected to the Lake and the Barn area to the north by a long dirt road, which ran from the Lodge parking lot along the west margin of the Green past the Boys Area and Campfire Circle, where a trail split off around the west side of the lake which led to the Nature Area, where various wild and domesticated animals were kept and instruction in nature and environmental studies took place.

The main road continued past the Campfire Circle and around the Boy's Area Hill and downhill to the east side of the Lake. At the bottom of the hill was the Archery Area, where campers would learn archery skills by shooting at targets set on haybales.

Following the road's curve past the Archery Area led to the Lake, which included a boating sailing area and swimming area.

Sailing Area. In the Sailing Area, campers learned all about sailing and boating and sailed El Toro sailboats around the Lake.
Lake Swimming Area. The Lake Swimming Area was to the north and was a square area of water marked off by yellow nylon ropes with floats attached to a large plywood float in the center. Swimmers would swim out to the float, rest or sunbathe there, play games such as "king of the mountain," and dive into the water.

Fishing Area. The dam on the northside of the Lake was the locale for fishing activities, where a counselor would teach campers how to bait a hook and other secrets of fishing, and fish for the bluegill perch and bass in the Lake.

The Barn and Corral. Following the road past the dam led down to the Corral and Barn Area containing the pens and fenced areas where the ranch’s horses and domestic animals lived, and where campers would learn horseback riding and compete in Rodeos.
Picnic Area. To the north of the Barn was a shaded area with barbeque and picnic tables where ranch picnics would take place.

The Indian Burial Ground. Beyond and to the North of the Barn was a creek and long expanse of land called the Indian Burial Ground, due to artifacts found there from an old Pomo Indian Village site. Campers would take long horseback trail rides to this area, bring their sleeping bags, and sleep overnight around the campfire area there. These overnight outings were real adventures that campers looked forward to and vividly remembered.

Conclusion

The Bar 49 Summer Camp operated under the stewardship of Edward Keith in the spirit of wonder, inclusion, respect for our environment and for each other, and a love for the great outdoors until 1977, its final year of operation.
It provided a supportive environment which instilled positive values and encouraged children to learn to develop skills and self discipline by learning things that were fun, which fostered self-esteem, pride, and confidence in their ability to apply themselves to learn and master new fields of endeavor.

Co-educational dances, campfires, and social activities provided invaluable and memorable positive social experiences for development of social skills and relationships.

The Bar-49 Recreation Ranch literally changed lives for the better and provided foundations for positive social growth and memories for children from diverse social and economic backgrounds that would last a lifetime.

Magnificent in decay, the Bar-49 Ranch slumbered and became overgrown for many years until the property was converted into the Catacula Lake Winery by the Keith family.

Edward Alvin Keith passed away on September 15, 2006, as a great man whose kindness, intelligence, and creative initiative in making dreams come true positively influenced many children to grow up to be the kind of people that make this a better world to live in.