Summer Camps: **Nature in Black and White**

Summer camps originated as white institutions and remained so for decades. In the 1920s, African American organizations and churches created camps for Black children. Camp Guilford Bower was opened by St. Philips P.E. Church in 1927. And Camp Atwater, the first Black-owned camp, opened its doors to the children of the elite African American professional community in 1921.

Camps run by national groups such as the YMCA and the Boy Scouts of America were either completely segregated (separate and unequal) or chronologically segregated (separate weeks for different races). Even camps that claimed to be interracial often had a quota for Black children.

Integration came slow to summer camps, as it did to many recreational facilities—parks, beaches, playgrounds, pools—beginning with the socialist run camps in the 1930s, the settlement house camps in the 1940s, the national organizations during the postwar civil rights period, and finally in privately run camps. In 1970, the American Camping Association (ACA), set a new policy against racial discrimination. Camps were required to sign the non-discrimination statement to retain accreditation. The *Baltimore Afro-American* reported in November 1970 that "large numbers of completely private camps are continuing all-white admission policies."

Today, the ACA reports that 30% of day and overnight campers are campers of color.







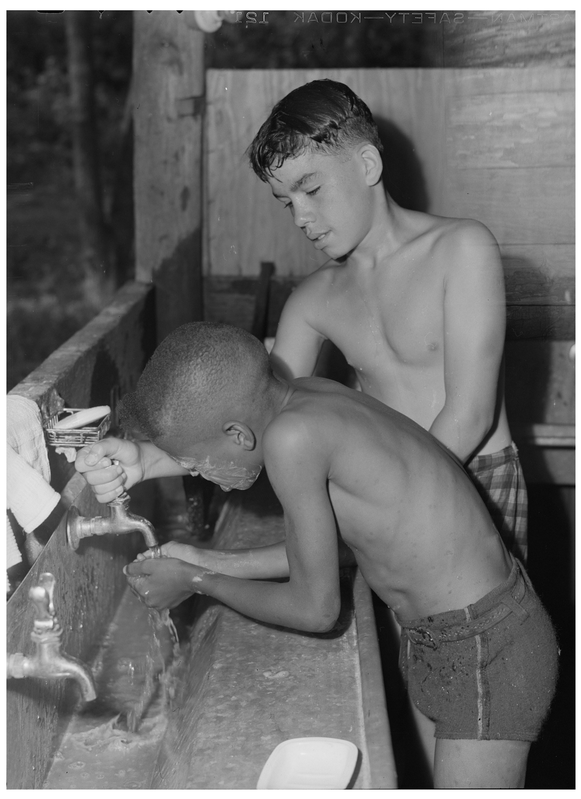
"Whether Tony or Arabella comes from an Italian or Puerto Rican or Negro family makes no difference at Union Settlement. The common joy of music, pottery, drawing, painting or living and eating together at camp --or just playing together for fun– leaves no room for race feeling."

Union Settlement Association camp brochure, 1944.

In 1943, renowned photographer Gordon Parks was hired by the Office of War Information, to shoot a series on summer camps. He turned his camera on three interracial camps run by the Union Settlement Association: Camp Nathan Hale, Camp Gaylord White, and Camp Ellen Marvin.

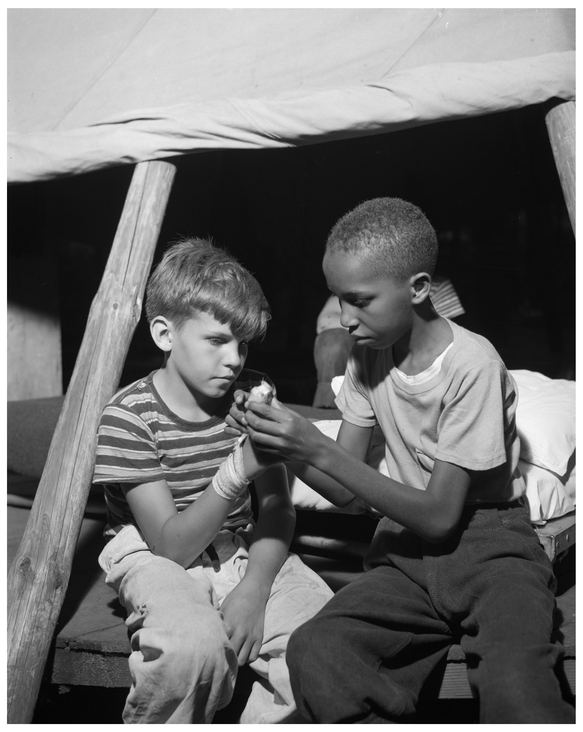














Learn more about integration of summer camps::

- Hardin, Amanda Suzanne. *Summer Camp's Color Line: Racialized Landscapes and the Struggle for Integration, 1890-1950.* 2017. Montana State University. scholarworks.montana.edu/xmlui/handle/1/14904
- Martin-Hardin, Amanda. "Nature in Black and White: Summer Camps and Racialized Landscapes in the Photography of Gordon Parks." *Environmental History,* vol. 23, no. 3, 2018, pp. 594–605.
- Spensley, Allie, "Segregated Summer Camps." US History Scene, ushistoryscene.com/article/segregated-summer-camps/