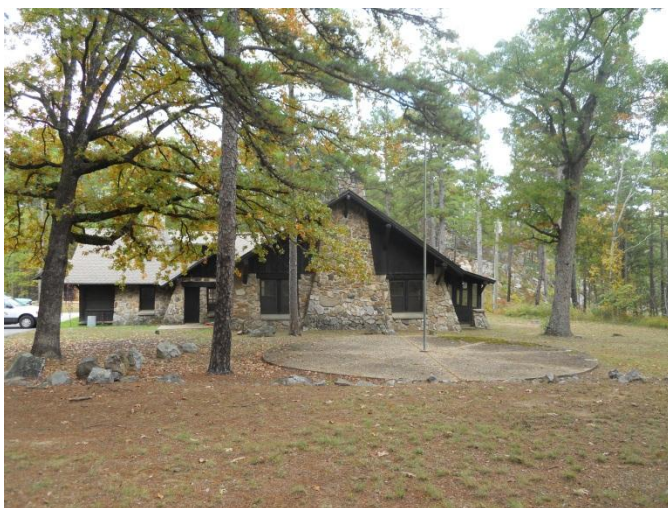
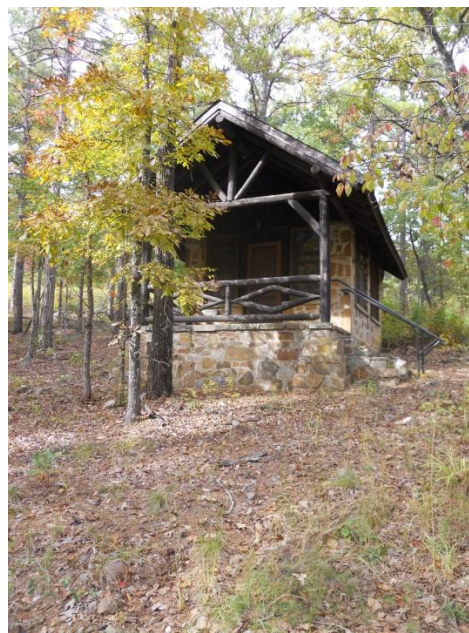


Walks through History
Camp Ouachita Girl Scout Camp Historic District
AR Hwy. 324 near Thornburg, Perry County
November 9, 2013
By: Rachel Silva



Great Hall, Camp Ouachita



Cabin, Lakeview Unit, Camp Ouachita

Intro

Hi, my name is Rachel Silva, and I work for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the “Walks through History” tour of Camp Ouachita! I’d like to thank the U.S. Forest Service for allowing us to tour the property today and the Perry County Historical Museum and Perry County Historical & Genealogical Society for co-sponsoring the tour. In preparation for this tour, I received information and help from a lot of people—

Tommy Jameson, Jameson Architects (who did the most recent rehab at Camp O)

Becky Witsell

Beverly Doremus

Lynda Suffridge

Karen Brazil

Jeannette McClennon

Jerry Williams
Diana Angelo
Denise Turner
Shawn Smith
Susan Sullivan
Janis Foust
Linda Horton
Becky Mulvaney
Jo Anne Mills

This tour is worth 2 hours of AIA continuing education credit. If you're interested, see me afterwards.

Summary

The Camp Ouachita Girl Scout Camp Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1992 and was elevated to national significance in 2001. Located in the Ouachita National Forest about 30 miles west of Little Rock and 10 miles south of Perryville, Camp Ouachita is the last remaining Works Progress Administration-built Girl Scout camp in the United States. Constructed between 1936 and 1940 for the Little Rock Girl Scout Council, Camp Ouachita was a top-notch facility laid out according to the unit plan and contained high-quality, Rustic-style buildings, all in accordance with 1930s guidelines for the construction of organization camps and recreation structures. The camp's construction also represents a significant instance of cooperation between the U.S. Forest Service, Civilian Conservation Corps, Works Progress Administration, and the Little Rock Girl Scout Council (nonprofit organization) to advance the cause of recreation during the Great Depression.

Outdoor Recreation & the Girl Scouts

During the late 19th century, outdoor recreation grew in importance as the United States became increasingly industrialized, and Americans found themselves with more leisure time. Wealthy city residents vacationed at seaside and mountain

resorts, and the first summer camps for youth opened in the northeastern United States. Organized camping gained popularity during the early 20th century, and by the early 1930s, about 1 million children participated in more than 7,000 camps each year. Recreation advocates touted the benefits of camping, which included things like “enrichment of the inner life,” “understanding of basic natural phenomena,” and “developing social skills.”

The history of the Girl Scouts of America goes back to 1912, when Juliette “Daisy” Gordon Low of Savannah, Georgia, started the first troop with a membership of 18 girls. Ms. Low envisioned a girl-centered organization that would bring young women out of their comfortable home environment to learn community service, practical skills, and experience the outdoors. The first Girl Scout camp was established in 1922 in New York, and by 1935, the Girl Scouts operated 984 camps across the country (by comparison, the Boy Scouts had 600 camps in 1935 & the YMCA had 1,200 camps in 1936). A 1937 publication called “Girl Scout Camping Objectives” summarized the benefits of Girl Scout camp, saying, “The basic objectives of Girl Scout camping are identical with those of the [camping] movement, the development of the girl along physical, emotional, mental, moral, and social lines, to the end that there may result not only a personally enriched individual, but also an intelligently participating citizen in a democratic social order.”

In addition to being numerous, and maybe because they were numerous, the Girl Scouts developed and popularized standards for organized camping. These standards applied to camp size, soil conditions, water supply, and sanitation. The Girl Scouts adopted the “unit plan” of camp layout, which was a departure from the traditional method of camp organization with tents or cabins constructed in straight lines like a military installation. The unit plan consisted of one central administrative or basic services unit surrounded by multiple units for campers, each with its own cabins, bathhouse, and troop (or unit) house. This allowed the large camp group to be subdivided, which was “the most effective medium in developing the individual girl.”

Ouachita National Forest

The Ouachita National Forest, originally called the Arkansas National Forest, was created through an executive order issued by President Theodore Roosevelt on December 18, 1907. In the early years, National Forests were created for timber production, grazing, and watershed protection—not for recreation. Americans hiked, picnicked, and camped in National Forests, but recreational use was limited by the Forests’ remote locations. However, automobile transportation allowed more and more Americans to travel to the Forests for wilderness getaways, forcing the Forest Service to address the issue of recreational facilities.

The 1915 Term Occupancy Act enabled the Forest Service to allow private development of public forest lands for terms of up to 30 years by people or organizations wishing to build summer camps, hotels, or resorts (but private development of public forests had been going on since at least 1902). Thousands of private summer homes were built in National Forests, as well as hundreds of camping and resort facilities. In essence, the Forest Service adopted a “hands-off” policy on recreational facilities, allowing private entities to provide such opportunities. The creation of the National Park Service in 1916 pushed the Forest Service to provide public recreational facilities (or risk being converted into a National Park).

Rustic Architecture

As more recreational facilities were built in National Forests and Parks, it became necessary to develop guidelines for their construction. Buildings should meet the needs of visitors without detracting from the scenic qualities of the area. “Rustic” architecture was the answer. Buildings were adapted to fit a particular site, foundations were low and inconspicuous, native materials were used for construction, and decoration was simple or nonexistent. In the 1930s, the National Park Service, and to a lesser extent, the Forest Service, published construction guidelines because of the New Deal. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs—especially the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)

and the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—made possible the construction of a vast array of facilities on public lands, and those facilities had to blend in with the natural surroundings.

The Beginnings of Camp Ouachita

Chartered in 1928, the Little Rock Girl Scout Council initially made arrangements for its troops to share Camp Quapaw, a Boy Scout camp built in 1925 west of Benton in Saline County. This arrangement only provided the Girl Scouts with one camping session each summer, and was not intended to be permanent. Sue Worthen Ogden, daughter of prominent Little Rock banker W. B. Worthen and wife of physician Mahlon D. Ogden, spearheaded the effort to establish a Girl Scout camp in central Arkansas. Ogden was a board member of Girl Scouts, Inc., on the national level, and from the 1930s until her death in 1954, she logged hundreds of miles of travel and spent countless hours in meetings with government officials and potential supporters to negotiate the camp's establishment and ensure its smooth operation. After months of looking at prospective sites in the Ouachita National Forest, Ogden contacted Forest Supervisor A. W. Hartman in April 1935 to express her interest in a site along Narrow Creek at a location called "the Narrows," where a dam could be built to create a small lake. Sue Ogden then coordinated with three federal agencies—the Forest Service, CCC, and WPA—and recruited Perry County to serve as the "official" sponsor of the WPA project (because only governmental entities could sponsor WPA projects, and the Girl Scout Council did not qualify because it was a private organization). By April 1936, Ogden had the necessary permits for a 30-acre Girl Scout camp on the north side of what would become Lake Sylvia. Undoubtedly, Sue Ogden's "good connections" enabled her to gain the support of influential people who helped her project get federal funds.

Construction of the camp coincided with the construction of the Narrow Creek Dam. Although it was an integral part of Camp Ouachita, Lake Sylvia was not built specifically for the Girl Scouts. Prior to Sue Ogden's interest in the area, the Forest Service had already planned to create a recreational lake in the vicinity. In 1936-

1937 the Civilian Conservation Corps built the Narrow Creek Dam and cleared the lake site for the U.S. Forest Service. The 35-foot dam created a 22-acre lake. By June 1937, the dam was completed and the lake filled. The Forest Service named the lake "Sylvia" at the suggestion of Sue Ogden, who had attended a 1934 Girl Scout conference in Boston, where she heard a speech about the ideal Girl Scout entitled, "Who is Sylvia? What is She?" One end of Lake Sylvia was used by the Girl Scouts, and the other end was a public recreation area managed by the Forest Service.

The Works Progress Administration provided much of the funding and labor for the construction of Camp Ouachita. Three separate WPA work projects were approved, one each in 1936, 1937, and 1938. Altogether, more than \$64,000 in WPA funding went into Camp Ouachita, more than 2/3 of it for labor. By the end of the third project in 1940, the combined expenditures of the WPA and the Girl Scout Council totaled almost \$75,000 (equivalent to about \$1.2 million today). After receiving the first WPA grant in 1936, the Girl Scout Council hired the well-known Little Rock architectural firm of Thompson, Sanders & Ginocchio to design all of the buildings for the camp. Frank Ginocchio was the supervising architect on the project, and his drawings were completed in September 1936. When the last buildings were completed in 1940, the layout of Camp Ouachita was similar to the original site plan, but some modifications were made.

In keeping with Forest Service guidelines, Ginocchio designed the camp buildings in the Rustic style of architecture with battered (sloped/angled) fieldstone walls; broadly-pitched, gabled roofs with hand-split cypress shingles; and exposed hewn-log framework.

Great Hall

The centerpiece of Camp Ouachita, the Great Hall (or Ogden Hall), was the first building completed. Construction began in December 1936, and it was ready for the June 1937 camping session. The Great Hall was designed to accommodate the entire camp population for meals, and it also housed the kitchen and serving area,

an office, and storage spaces. The original screened porch still runs along the south side of the Great Hall. During the first camping session in 1937, only the Great Hall, ice house, one bathhouse, and a swimming dock and diving platform on Lake Sylvia were completed. The girls slept in tents on elevated wooden platforms and were divided into three units called Tepee, Hiawatha, and Kiwasan.

Cabins/Units

Cabins and camping units were constructed as funds allowed. Individuals and businesses who donated the cost of a cabin's materials (\$139) were allowed to name "their" cabins, and name plates were installed above the cabin doors. When Camp Ouachita opened in the summer of 1938, it had four units, two of them with cabins (unit names were Lakeview, Hilltop, Valley, and Sherwood Forest). By the summer of 1939, the director's cabin was finished, as were most of the other cabins. However, only three bathhouses were done, and no troop houses were built yet. In the meantime, campers did arts & crafts and other activities on the porches of the bathhouses. The boathouse was built in 1939 adjacent to the swimming dock.

During the first week of January 1940, the Girl Scout Council announced that Camp Ouachita would be completed in 6 days. The *Arkansas Democrat* reported that the completed camp would consist of the Great Hall, director's cabin, four troop houses, 24 cabins that would accommodate 96 girls, infirmary, storage house, garage, wood shed, ice house, canoe shed (boathouse), two pump houses, incinerators, and septic tanks. The two pump houses reflect a problem that plagued Camp Ouachita from the start—lack of a reliable and sufficient water source. A well drilled for the camp in 1937 proved inadequate, and in 1938 the Girl Scouts received permission to pipe water across the dam from a Forest Service well on the south side of Lake Sylvia. Even with two wells and pump houses, the water problem was not solved. So water was pumped from the lake for toilets and showers. **Former campers are quick to point out that Camp Ouachita had cold showers!!

Additions & Improvements, 1941-1959

In early 1941 the CCC built a rock retaining wall and rock steps at the swimming area to control erosion.

By the mid-1940s, the unit names "Lakeview," "Tall Timber," "Cliff Top," and "Echo Valley" were in consistent use. Prior to this time, unit names varied from one camping session to another.

In 1949 a filter and chlorination plant were constructed at Camp Ouachita to purify water from Lake Sylvia, and the two wells were abandoned. In May 1950 Camp Ouachita got electricity in the Great Hall, caretaker's house, infirmary, and the ice house.

On April 24, 1954, Sue Worthen Ogden died. It is fair to say that the relationship between the Little Rock Girl Scout Council and the Forest Service was never quite the same after her death.

In 1958 a primitive camping unit for older girl scouts was built on the south side of Lake Sylvia. It was called "Atihcauo" (Atee-chi-o)--"Ouachita" spelled backwards. The unit consisted of 6 tent platforms, one unit house designed by the Little Rock architectural firm of Swaim & Allen, a small bathhouse (made out of an old well house), and a sanitary pit privy.

There was another tent camping unit called "Toltec" located to the south of the Lakeview camping unit. Toltec was created before Atihcauo.

In the early part of 1959, a new boathouse was constructed to replace the original using the same rock piers.

Final Years

By the early 1960s, the relationship between the Girl Scout Council and the Forest Service was strained at best. In 1966 the Forest Service took 26 acres from Camp Ouachita (none of which had improvements on it) in order to expand the public use area at Lake Sylvia. [The camp's size had fluctuated over the years. The 1966 reduction in acreage brought the camp from 79 acres to 53 acres. It was about 60 acres in 1992.]

The lack of sufficient clean water continued to plague the camp. A new pumping station was constructed in 1972, and in 1977 a new well was drilled, but it didn't produce enough water per minute. So water continued to be pumped from Lake Sylvia, despite growing concerns about the level of pollution in the lake.

By the late 1970s, the Girl Scouts couldn't afford to pay for required building maintenance and necessary updates at Camp Ouachita. Sadly, in January 1979 the Girl Scout Council decided not to renew its land-use permit with the Forest Service, effectively ending operation of Camp Ouachita as a Girl Scout camp (the last summer of campers was 1978).

Deterioration/Demolition/Rehabilitation

Between 1982 and 1985, the Forest Service authorized demolition of some deteriorated camp buildings, including the Atihcauo unit house, the boathouse, and a couple cabins and the bathhouse in the Echo Valley camping unit. In the summer of 1986, permission was granted for the removal of the fieldstone floors in some cabins and unit houses (salvaged stone for other projects). As you'll see if you walk with me to the more distant camping units, those buildings are in various states of disrepair and deterioration.

On a brighter note...

Many people have contributed money and time in an effort to preserve Camp Ouachita. Additional research was conducted after the initial National Register

listing, and it was determined that Camp Ouachita was nationally significant because it is the only remaining WPA-built Girl Scout camp in the country. The property's national significance made it eligible for the Save America's Treasures grant program (federal money for nationally significant properties).

[The only other camp constructed by the WPA specifically for the Girl Scouts was the Cloud Rim Girl Scout Lodge in Utah that burned to the ground in 1992 after being struck by lightning. Camp Steiner, a Boy Scout camp in Utah, is partially comprised of log structures built by the WPA in 1937.]

Using a combination of federal and state funds as well as private donations, Phase I of rehabilitation work began at Camp Ouachita in 2001. Phase I focused on the Great Hall. Tommy Jameson was the project architect. Restrooms were put in the old kitchen, and a radiused porch connected the Great Hall to a new kitchen unit and the historic staff quarters building. You can differentiate the old from the new by looking at the wood—dark creosote wood is original and light colored wood is new. Intended use—rented for special events and meetings or possibly used as a visitor information center.

Phase II of the rehab project focused on the Lakeview camping unit because it was closest to the road and the Great Hall, making it easily accessible. Had to enclose the screened platforms, add A/C, and put in restrooms so they could be rented by the general public. Did some triage on the remaining camping units—put some new roofs on and stabilized structures for future phases. Phase II was completed in 2007.

Girl Scout Camp Memories

Now for the fun stuff...

Girl Scouts at Camp Ouachita engaged in activities like hiking, swimming, canoeing, arts & crafts, folklore, dramatics, and singing.

There were 3 two-week sessions and 1 one-week session (the 1-week session was at the end of the summer). In 1962 it cost \$40 for a scout to attend the 2-week session and \$45 for a non-scout. [Comparable to about \$300 today.]

A typical day at camp went something like this:

Wake up at 7 a.m.

Breakfast (marched there with your unit & sang on the way)

Cabin inspection (had to make your bed, sweep, put things away)

Worked on camper skills/badge work (how to cook on an open fire, hiking, how to tie knots)

Arts & Crafts

Lunch—rang the bell behind the Great Hall for all meals

Rest period (you could write letters home during this time)

Swimming

Archery

Canoeing

Dinner

Singing, Skits & Campfire

Retiring of the colors (TAPS)

Shower time

Time for bed

Swimming—two cribs on the lake; separated from the deeper water by a seawall topped by a wooden catwalk or dock. Only the advanced swimmers were allowed out past the seawall. There was a floating platform with diving boards out in the deeper water as well as two floating life guard towers. Everyone had to take a swimming test on the first day of camp to determine how advanced you were.

Fish bit your legs if you had mechurochrome on them for mosquito bites.

Girls dusted their socks with yellow sulfur powder to prevent tick bites.

Food was good and plentiful at camp. During meals, everything was served family style and units took turns serving, cleaning the plates, etc. You were expected to use good manners at the table.

While at camp, the girls would do a backpacking trip up to the fire tower or Inspiration Point and sleep out under the stars.

Trading post vouchers—there was a trading post in the Great Hall, and if your parents had given you money for vouchers, you could spend them for stationery, pencils, stamps, shirts, Fanta, Coke, etc.

Cabins—originally had 4 cots to a cabin but later had 5.

Cabins had screened openings—no windows. There was a canvas flap on the outside that you could roll down if it rained (but whoever rolled it down usually got wet!). Obviously—no air conditioning. No bathroom in cabins—each unit had its own bathhouse. No electricity in cabins—used lanterns, candles, flashlights. Some campers wrote their names on the cabin walls.

Bathhouse—Open porch area with a trough down the middle and sinks. Back portion of the building was enclosed and had toilets on one side and showers on the other. The “caper” chart assigned cabins different cleaning jobs; either jobs in the troop house or the bathhouse. Cleaning the toilets was the dreaded “caper.”

Each unit had 3 counselors—one head counselor and two CITs (counselor in training). And every counselor had a nickname—never went by their real names. Things like Big ‘Un, Little ‘Un, Cass, Flipper, Chip, Scooter, Squeaky, and Glo.

The public recreation area at Lake Sylvia was completely separate, and Girl Scouts were NOT allowed to go over there. There were boys at the rec area, and some of them periodically snuck over to the Girl Scout camp.

Everything was done on the “buddy system.” You had a buddy wherever you went, whether it was swimming, walking on the trail, going to the bathhouse at

night, etc. The “buddy board” was by the boathouse, and when you went swimming, you flipped over your number on the board. When you got out, you turned it back over so the counselors knew you were all out of the water.

It was scary to walk to the bathroom at night. You had to wake up your buddy and take a flashlight.

In the 1950s, Hwy. 324 was not paved, and Hwy. 10 was not paved all the way from LR to Perryville.

Camp Ouachita was a great place for girls to learn leadership and practical skills, experience the outdoors, and make friends. I’ll end my talk with a letter written by a former camper—

Dear Mom and Dad,

I’m having a great time. Today we found a nest of baby copperheads behind the cabin and some scorpions in the bath house. I’m covered with chigger bites. Camp is fun.

Love, Becky

Lakeview unit—2 buildings open

Caretaker’s House

Well house/foundation of ice house

Infirmery ruin

Store room/staff cabin ruin

Walk trail loop and show other units—Director’s cabin & personal bathhouse, Tall Timber, Cliff Top, Echo Valley

May call Susan Jones to rent the Great Hall. The Forest Service currently has a proposal submitted to buy furnishings for the rehabbed cabins.