

# It's Hammer Time

*Being a less efficient handyman can make you more effective... at changing lives*

**T**he last few weeks before camp starts are hectic for anyone working on camp maintenance and facility projects. What seemed like plenty of time in the fall has now come down to a mad dash to be ready for the first-session campers. Some things **HAVE** to be ready, like holes patched in screens and toilet parts replaced. But some would be better if you didn't do them.

I don't mean *not* do them; I mean have someone else do them; and not just because it would save time for other projects. (I know better than that.)

Lots of camps have volunteer weekends in the spring to "open up" for the season or accomplish a special project or two. And every time I mention this to a group of camp property managers I get a lot of snickers. "I HATE those volunteer events," one will say. Another adds, "It takes me longer to get ready for them and clean up after them than it would to just do it myself!" So I share an example of a group of two-dozen camp moms (and some grandmothers) who get together the second week of May every year to plant seeds and flowers at Camp Takodah.

By summer there are mounds of color in front of every building in camp. The director invites at least one of the volunteers to be there at each check-in day, as so many parents will comment on how beautiful and well cared-for the camp looks. He asks them to "Please go thank Emily Jones over there. She and her group of volunteers do the plantings!" And as a result Emily gets new additions to her group, and new donations of perennials at every check-out day. Nice.

Yet the real story begins next winter when a parent will run into one of these volunteers at the PTA or in the grocery store and say, "I just don't know what to do with my kids this summer," and every volunteer responds, "Oh you **HAVE** to send them to **OUR** camp!" Yes, camp maintenance director, you could plant the



flowers yourself. But there's no way you could sell so many new parents on filling your camp with their kids. And those new campers will pay for the tools and materials and staff that you've always wanted. The more volunteers, the more meaningful the projects, the more enthusiastic salespeople they become. They're part of your family.

## Put Off Until Tomorrow

Camp people love to make lists and set goals, and we get obsessed with having something "new" every year. Maybe it's a holdover from trying to please our own parents, but I think we put too much attention on the "new" and not enough on everything being "fixed." (In fact when you add something brand new it tends to make everything *else* around it look even shabbier than it did before!) Parents don't mind "rustic." They *detest* "dirty and run-down."

Here's why I think you should put off some projects until after camp starts: because campers would have the thrill of their life helping you build them. Some of you have great memories

of learning skills at your dad's side, "helping" him when in fact he was spending three times as long because he saw the joy it would bring you in saying, "Look what I did!" But today that experience is pretty rare. Camp parents often spend less time with their kids because they think that a nice house and an expensive college is more important than showing their kid how to use a hammer or wrench or a cordless drill. (You know I'm right because so many of our *counselors* are clueless with tools!)

For a kid (and the kid in all of us), using tools is fun. Building useful stuff is fun. Working together on a project builds friendships and lifelong memories. Learning new skills builds confidence and the courage to try new things. And doing all this with a caring adult gives kids a sense of worth that gives them strength of character.

Don't build those new picnic tables in May; just cut the pieces out and wait until summer when you can offer it as an activity. For one hour a day spend your time with a group of kids. Is there anything more valuable you could be doing? Let's look at some examples.

I picked picnic tables first because every camp needs more; more places for kids to slow down and sit and talk about what they've been doing; to "set" the memories while creating friendships. We need to be eating outside more often, facing each other more often, hanging-out *outside* of the cabin instead of inside, imagining a fort or a boat or a carnival booth, climbing on and jumping off. It uses big hunks of wood and you can use hammers and screw-guns and socket wrenches to put them together. Kids learn how to measure, use a square, and work together. And when it's done they can *use* it and show it off to everyone (including mom and dad). Lots of them will grow up to build one with their own kids some day. Talk about your long-term effects of camp!

And those campers' moms and dads will be *way* more impressed that their kids are showing off "their" picnic table than they ever would have been seeing that table on opening day. I guarantee it.

## More Stuff That "Needs Building"

*You* want to leave something meaningful behind, right? Kids want that too, but seldom get to do it in a positive way. Kids who never learn how to fix things and build things have much less respect for the work of others, feel more helpless, and are more likely to be "creative" in destructive ways. Camp staff that can fix, build, cook, sell or even deliver mail can help kids grow in ways that will far outlast any game of capture-the-flag. Here are some examples to help you start your list of projects for this summer:

- Benches – Like picnic tables, no camp has enough. You need them for campfires or gathering spots, for watching or waiting, and most important for talking. Good long-lasting benches can be as simple as a 2x10" stretched across a couple of short pieces of 6x6". But something with a back on it is so much more satisfying (to sit in, AND to build!)



One of my favorite designs is by the famous author of "A Sand County Almanac," Aldo Leopold. He designed this simple bench so people could sit and watch birds and beautiful views. I like it because it's clever and can be used almost anywhere from cabin porches to archery ranges. And kids love to bolt them together. (see photo) The plans are available online by Googling "Leopold Bench." I alter them slightly by using 2x6's for the legs and 2x10's

five feet long for the seats (wide enough for two people). And if you use two 5/4 x 6" deck boards for the seat back, it looks even more comfortable.

- Miniature Golf Course – This is another example of something that's fun to have and play, but way more useful in child development if kids and counselors help build it. Frame them with 2x6 sides and 2x2' nailing ledgers under the plywood "floors." Everything is glued and screwed so it will hold up being assembled and disassembled a lot. Handholds are cut into the sides to make them easier to lift and carry. The sections are all 3' wide, (4' would be nicer, but much heavier and harder to store.) Each piece is not more than 6 feet long so none are too heavy to carry, and could fit easily in mini-van for promotional events like school fairs. (Combined some holes are up to 12' long. Some are "dog-legs" left and right, and some are just off-set to create a jog.) Pieces join with standard door hinges, with bent 18d nails as pins. (easier to pull out.)

The carpet is standard indoor-outdoor green olefin glued down. "Water" traps are just blue carpet recessed down 1/2 inch. "Sand" bunkers are plywood beveled at edges, painted with tan paint and sprinkled with sand while wet. The obstacles could be as simple as blocks of wood, or removable camp "landmarks" like logs, rocks, drain pipe, or small "cabins" with an in-door and out-door. Your arts and crafts classes can work on some of those, too.

- Swim Dock – One of my son's favorite projects as a 10-year-old was helping the "Construction Crew" class lead by our property manager build a floating platform. The dock floats came from our local lumberyard, and the rest was just pressure-treated wood. When it was finished the names of all the "workers" were routed into a side board for posterity. Ten years later, those kids still talk about building it.

- Playground – This was one of *my* favorites! I'd visited YMCA Camp Pleasant Valley in NH and loved the small playground in their village of youngest campers. It was a place they could play within sight of their cabins so counselors let them gather their a lot. And at YMCA Camp Belknap I fell in love with the small "council rings" they have in each village, complete with a stage for nightly unit campfires.

Why not combine the two? We started with a few rows of benches in an arch, facing a stage about 6' deep and 12' wide. On each side there was a "fort" tower with platforms at 6' high sided with 5/4" x 6" deck boards pointed on top to look like log fort walls. Each of these "blockhouses" had a way to climb up inside and outside: ladders, ropes, a slide... normal playground stuff but keeping with the "fort" theme. We finished it off with a bridge between the two towers that acted as the backdrop for the stage.

The kids worked on it for several weeks, and when finished it became a kid-magnet. Great fun for climbing on and make-believe while waiting for counselors; a wonderful stage for evening campfires where skits could include people in the towers and popping out of windows!

- Stage, Council Ring, Chapel – Kids love being on stage, and not enough camps have them at their all-camp gathering spots. Skit nights are more special, song-leaders are easier to see, and kids will go out of their way just to hang out there. Eight feet deep and 24 feet long makes a stage big enough for most any skit, and by adding three rows of "steps" up to it all along the front, you've got built-in risers for an entire unit to stand on when they sing a song or do a cheer.

Some of my favorite additions are pieces of stockade fence on either side (for dramatic "enter stage left" and "right" moments!) And an impressive element that ends up being a marketing breakthrough: A big sign hung over the stage with your camp's name. It can hide a pull-down screen and stage

lights behind it, but most importantly every one of those thousand camper photos that are taken each summer at opening and closing night ceremonies now has your camp's name printed right across the top! (I've even been tempted to add the web site address, but I know my counselors would give me grief!)

- Cabin – at YMCA Camps Beckett and Chimney Corners (MA), the teen programs that sell out first each year are the “Construction Cabins.” In fact, they actually construct a camper cabin every year. Each group has a skilled carpenter that works with them eight hours a day, and as a result the teens learn how to use all the tools and even cut their own boards. Some of the most dedicated alumni come from these groups because the friendships they make while doing meaningful work are so strong. And every time they return to camp? Their first visit has to be to “their” cabin.

### **More Than Hammers**

Some things *aren't* so successful as camper or volunteer projects. Things that kids don't think need doing, for instance, like raking leaves or cleaning windows. (Adults working in groups might enjoy the time with each other, but that “Tom Sawyer” thing will go only just so far with teens!)

All of the examples in this article have been about building things,; but there's so much more we do at camp that kids would be thrilled to do if we entrusted them to help us.

- Serving drinks and snacks in the camp store
- Sorting mail into cabin mailboxes; handing out packages
- Cooking special meals or deserts for their cabin or unit
- Passing out icee-pops on hot days
- Doing the announcements at “flag pole”

There are times when many of us in camping forget that our goal is to build great kids, not just to entertain them. We're not running a theme park. But having them help *build* a theme park, now that's got some real possibilities!

*Gary Forster has worked with staff and volunteers at over 200 camps across 43 states in the last 8 years. Gary was a camp director for 25 years, but started out with degrees in Architecture and an MBA. Contact him at [www.garyforster.com](http://www.garyforster.com)*