In early 1950 a group of five women from Knoxville, Tennessee, met to organize a day camp. In their “Proposed Agenda for a Proposed Meeting for a Proposed Day Camp in Knoxville, Tenn.,” they wrote that, “The purpose of the Day Camp shall be to create an atmosphere for children in which they may develop understanding and appreciation of their neighbors here in the community, and in the whole great wide world.” The founding meeting was attended by Mrs. J.B. Watson (Emma Louvenia), Mrs. Robert Owens (Mary Jane), Mrs. Richard Henry (Helen), Miss Gertrude Hoffman (YWCA Director), Mrs. Rebecca (or Petie) Moulder. Four of the women were White, one African-American.

My sister and I attended the camp in 1954 and 1955 and my parents were camp volunteers from 1952 to 1955. As children we enjoyed the experience, but did not realize that we were part of an effort to break down racial barriers in a state where that was not only unusual, but potentially dangerous.

When I discovered that very little had been written about the camp other than an unpublished report by Jane Weeks and Jean Lacey and a few contemporary newspaper articles, and that neither the East Tennessee Historical Society nor the Beck Cultural Center had documentation on the camp, I decided to see what I could find. With the help of a fellowship from the Berea College Sound Archives I conducted interviews with eleven former campers and camp directors and reviewed archival materials held by the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and the Temple University Special Collections Research Center. This article is based on that research. (Quotes from interviews are in italics. Other quotes are from archival materials.)

The Camps

In the summer of 1950, an inter-racial group of 32 children and 8 counselors spent “two happy successful weeks” at a day camp held in the back yard of local supporters. What came to be called the Fellowship House Day Camp continued to be held every summer through 1972.

The first eight years the camp moved from the backyard of Mr. and Mrs. T.S. Pressley in Knoxville, to a large privately owned wooded lot on Chestnut Ridge in Knoxville, to the grounds of a local church, and in 1957, to Knoxville College. The last four years the camp was held at the lake-side Carl Cowan Park outside Knoxville.

In many ways the camp was a typical day camp. Gideon Fryer, camp director in 1951 said the camp was similar to vacation Bible school. “Actually a knock-off of the vacation Bible school. So while the Baptists were having vacation Bible school, Fellowship House was having the equivalent without the Bible.”

Lois White, camp director for the last five years of the camp described her experience.
We had an agenda or a schedule. Of course they swam, they loved to swim because many of them didn’t have that opportunity at home and didn’t get around to the parks … We had a big emphasis on singing, we did lots of camp songs. We did arts and craft works, lanyards. We had a big emphasis on nature because we were at Carl Cowan Park, we were in the woods. So we did a big part of the camp day on nature. ... At the end of the session we had a program that exhibited all of those things. We sang songs, we had crafts on exhibit, and we talked about nature and had some nature on exhibit. ... The parents came and it was at night. (Lois White)

Some summers, faculty from Knoxville College and the University of Tennessee led science activities. International visitors to Knoxville were invited to the camp; one year French was taught. Archery and swimming were added when the camp moved to Knoxville College.

Some years, activities were organized around a camp theme. The year the theme was Early Mountaineers, crafts included making baskets, digging sassafras for tea, and making sedge brooms. When Cherokee Life was the theme, older campers visited the Cherokee reservation. In 1961, space was the theme and campers were invited to “take part in this flight to Planet Knoxville College – a particularly habitable planet...”

The older campers went on an overnight camp-out, held the first few years at Carl Cowan Park and later in the Smokies.

The camping was just like being in a Boy Scout troop. We didn’t learn how to make knots, but we learned how to build a camp fire, cook over a fire, do a backpack, a sleeping bags, the things that you use for camping. (David Turk)

Everybody gets excited about going to the Smokies with new friends, old friends, eager friends, scared friends and cooking friends as we scale the mountain to Greenbrier Cabin. (Lois White)

The camps were in most ways typical day camps, but the politics of some of the adults were evident in the lyrics of some songs. When I attended camp we sang, “I don’t want to march in the infantry, ride in the cavalry, shoot in the artillery. I don’t want to fly over Germany, I want to be friendly,” with accompanying gestures. Lyrics included in the 1952 director Anne Kennedy’s report included these lyrics:

“If each little kid could have fresh milk each day,  
If each working man had enough time for play,  
If each homeless soul had a good place to stay,  
It could be a wonderful world!”

Even though the adults had a broader agenda, overall, the camp was just camp to the campers. As former camper David Turk told me,
You experience things with others and I think your level of understanding is better, you grow up with more, you’re more open. It’s more like that. It wasn’t like the civil rights march on Washington. It was not that. It wasn’t politically charged or anything like that. For the kids it was a good multicultural experience.

The parents knew what they were trying to do, but they didn’t sit you down and say “We’re sending you to an integrated camp.” They set you down and said, “We’re sending you to camp.”

We didn’t have problems. We were children. We had fun. If it was an experiment, it was in their minds. But whatever it was, it was successful because the camp grew.

And the camp did grow, with as many as 125 campers in the early 1960s.

The first year the camp was organized by an ad hoc committee, but that year the founding group organized a Knoxville branch of the Fellowship House and the Fellowship House sponsored the camp in subsequent years. The Fellowship House was affiliated with a national network of Fellowship Houses headquartered in Philadelphia, and the group in Knoxville was active in promoting desegregation and sponsoring educational and social opportunities to bring people together. But the day camps seem to have been their most consistent and long-lasting activity.

Each camp had a director, 18 over the 22 years the camp operated. A camp committee helped with the various tasks preparing for the camp. While a small fee was charged, $5.00 in the early years that increased to $15.00 by 1971, scholarships were provided, and as Mrs. Watson, chair in 1952 reminded Fellowship House members, “It would be nice to have something over and above the usual shoestring.” When the camp was held on the wooded lot, a Grounds Committee cleared the lot, dealt with the poison ivy, and raised rented tents for shelter. An appeal in The Window, the Fellowship House newsletter, asked “Every able bodied – or reasonable facsimile there of – Fellowship House member to bring tools and help out setting up for the camp.” Most years lunch was provided and a committee planned for, prepared and delivered the lunches.

The goal of this volunteer effort, from the June 1952 issue of The Window:

“For the third year, a small group of children will have a chance at Fellowship House Day Camp to build into their characters the positive assurance that all people are indeed alike. By working, playing, and eating together, children of different racial and religious backgrounds learn that the barriers that keep them apart are placed by grown-ups. Fellowship House believes if just one child acquires a background for future maturity, all the work of all the committees is worthwhile.”

In some ways Knoxville was a more progressive city than others in Tennessee and avoided the violence that marked the de-segregation of schools in nearby Clinton in 1956 and in Nashville in 1957. At the same time, the undergraduate school at the University of
Tennessee wasn’t de-segregated until 1963 and the city schools weren’t fully de-segregated until 1964.

When the day camp began in 1950 it was not clear how it would be received. According to a report written by Jane Weeks, the director of the first camp in 1950, they chose a “fairly secluded neighborhood,” in order “to keep a low profile so as not to cause unwanted attention.” Weeks reported no trouble beyond some “annoying phone calls” and attempts to get the health department to close the camp.

Many of the organizers of the camp were members of the Unitarian church in Knoxville and this congregation had received threats when they accepted their first black member. Dick Henry was the Unitarian minister when the camp started:

They began out of a desire to have a really important significant program for their own kids. And they were not going to have any questions asked about race. All comers would be welcome. Eager to have it a cross-racial group of folks, intentionally integrated. And there was a little hush-hushness about it as it got going. I remember thinking, “We are off here in the mountains and they won’t find us.” They wouldn’t court it. (Henry)

Ruth Martin, camp director in 1957 and 1958 related an incident while stopping to buy gasoline in Gatlinburg while on a trip to the Smokies:

We stopped to buy gas and of course when you go to get gas you do these other things. And so... the girls immediately left the car to go to the bathroom. So they were gone from the car when the attendant got back. And he said, “Well, where are the girls?” And I said, “Well, they’ve gone off to the bathroom.” “Oh!!” That was just to him a terrifying idea that they would go to the White bathroom. So he got really livid, kind of and said, “When did they leave and when will they be back?” And I remember just dragging my feet... We just loitered along and pretty soon I saw the girls coming back from the bathroom.

When asked about the camp organizers’ courage, Martin said, “We didn’t think of ourselves as very brave, just a little maybe, because it just wasn’t the way they did things back then. ... We were not flaming liberals at all; we would go along quietly with getting things accomplished.”

What was accomplished? The former campers mostly reported that the camp “was just camp.” We enjoyed going, but the fact that the camp was inter-racial was maybe noted, but not a big issue.

What I remember, vaguely after all these years, is it was a fun camp to go to, and it was inter-racial. And as I recall it was probably my first experience in any kind of situation that was inter-racial like that. It was a fun thing. I think we were at Knoxville College and maybe we went up into the Smokey Mountains. (Daniel Brown)
We were just students that were reaping the benefits of having those classes and having that interaction with other people... (Turk)

My memory must be of one of the first ones because I remember a road going up to it and it was dirt, it was clay and it was very woody. That’s the one I really remember. I just remember a lot of children and arts and crafts. (Sherby Jones)

At the same time, the camp did have lasting impacts.

It took people across demographic lines. I’m sure it makes a difference because it teaches you about tolerance and how to—but at that age you’re not thinking that deeply. You’re just able to encounter, you’ve seen these people, you’ve seen an Asian person. (Turk)

As I said the inter-racial part of it, that was a very progressive thing for the time. Because being a segregated society in the mid—50s there wasn’t hardly interaction with children or adults, so that was sort of an experiment to see how it would work. Didn’t have any problems that I as a child know about. There may have been some problems from outside people that just didn’t want to see the races together in any kind of way. But I don’t recall any kind of trouble in that regard. (Brown)

Fellowship House members and former camper Harry Wiersema took part in lunch counter sit-ins in Knoxville in 1960.

My parents sent me to Fellowship Camp, they sent me to church that was integrated, I had black friends in Sunday school and then when I came back from working in a steel mill [as a engineering co-op placement], my parents were down there at noon getting bug spray sprayed in her face down at the lunch counter and my father was risking his job. And I didn’t go through any training. I just showed up. I just found out where the sit-ins were and I showed up because I’d absorbed all that.

The work of organizing the day camp and the other activities of the Fellowship House not only brought children together across race, but brought adults together as well. One of the women who organized the first day camp went to an NAACP meeting, and after some skepticism, the organization endorsed the camp.

Former camper Daniel Brown, who serves on the Knoxville City Council, reflected on the impact of the day camps:

I think it did have an impact on the town, because even though it wasn’t highly publicized, it wasn’t a secret either. And I think it helped people to know that the races can do something together, especially young people and children. So I think that had a good historical impact, in my opinion that these walls of separation are coming down and you see an experiment going forward. Of course everybody in Knoxville probably didn’t know Fellowship Camp existed, but some people did. People on different churches,
different organizations, they knew about it, both blacks and whites. I believe yes, I think it had an impact when they were thinking about integrating the schools, it showed that we have sort of a road map if you will of something that happened along those lines – they didn’t have a lot of big problems with it, to my knowledge... I think it had a ripple effect just having that. Because I think to me it was an experiment in human relations and the experiment was successful in my view.

Poet Nikki Giovanni, who was a junior counselor at the camp in 1958 and whose grandmother, Louvenia Watson was one of the original camp organizers, put it like this:

She was not alone. All of those women. That’s what I’m saying, ... I think that working with the 70-year-olds is important because we’re losing a lot of little stories that nobody thinks amount to much, but when you start to put them all together you see how cities were changed because of women like my grandmother.

The Fellowship House Day Camp is one of these stories.