This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit http://www.djreprints.com.

http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121573288465544169

AT LEISURE MAIN

Cabin Fever

By Cameron Stracher

Updated July 11, 2008 12:01 a.m. ET

A couple of weeks ago, I put my 12-year-old son on a bus at a rest stop off Interstate 95 in Darien, Conn. I won't see him again until August. For this privilege, I am paying about a thousand dollars a week. While some people might be willing to pay even more to send away their tweens for a good chunk of the summer, it breaks my heart each time I do it (and not just because of the size of the check). He's going to spend the rest of his life away from home; why are we accelerating the process? But he wants to go, and my wife thinks it's good for him, and I'm just his father after all.

GETTY IMAGES

Once upon a time, parents didn't need to take out a second mortgage to care for their kids during the summer. My own summers were spent in a three-bedroom cottage in Woods Hole, Mass., where my father, a scientist, did research on squid and sea urchins while my brother, sister and I attended "science school" classes, biked around town, swam and played tennis, learned to smoke and drink, and generally got into trouble. I remember them as the happiest days of my life. But the house my father bought for a pittance on his academic salary is now beyond the reach of anyone but an investment banker, and no one will pay me to spend two months doing research in a lab. So we send our children to camp.

Like so many other aspects of modern childhood, summer camps arose with industrialized society. Abigail Van Slyck, author of "A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth (1890-1960)," notes that early camps were part of a back-to-nature trend intended to "counteract" the "softness of the modern home environment" and the evils of urban life. According to writer Jeffrey Moran, camp enthusiasts believed that "a dose of regulated savagery for children at camp was the proper antidote to an overdeveloped industrial culture." Thus early camps were quite rugged, often perched at the edge of a lake (to be further from "civilization"), with limited facilities, inadequate housing, bad food and mosquitoes as large as birds.

As ideals about childhood changed after World War II, however, and as camp professionals tried to appeal to doting parents, summer camps began to replicate some of the comforts of home (flush toilets, anyone?). It was only a matter of time before meals were prepared by staff, badminton was introduced, and hot water replaced cold baths in the lake. The rhetorical ideal of camp itself changed, too, Ms. Van Slyck notes, as camps emphasized the social and organizational virtues of shared work and cooperation as preparation for productive lives in an urban and suburban environment. Specialized camps offering tennis instruction, basketball, dance and other skills proliferated in the 1970s and '80s, the better to prepare children for an adulthood of cutthroat competition.

Today, the pendulum may be swinging slightly back to nature, and one of the things my wife and I like best about my son's camp is that there are no computers or cellphones allowed, and the kids actually have to do quite "primitive" things to entertain themselves -- like play ping pong and (gasp!) read.

According to the American Camp Association, there are 12,000 camps in the U.S., nearly 7,000 of them "resident" camps, employing 1.2 million adults and enrolling 11 million campers. The summer-camp market generates $10 billion to $12 billion in revenues annually, according to CampGroup, the largest operator of for-profit camps in the U.S., which is a lot of marshmallows. Fees range widely -- from $200 to $1,500 a week, says CampGroup -- with most "premium camps" (those charging more than $900 a week) in the Northeast. Indeed, the lengthy "sleepaway" experience was originally a Northeast phenomenon. This explains why my wife -- from Idaho -- spent only one week at a Catholic youth camp while growing up, and why wealthy friends in Los Angeles (the father is from New York) stick their son on an airplane to Boston so that he can live in a bunk bed in New Hampshire for a month.

But in many upper-middle-class communities it's hard to find a kid who doesn't go to camp. The steady growth in camp enrollment and the increase in the number of camps (day camps, for example, grew by 90% in the past 20 years) reflect this new reality. The streets in our town are emptied of children once school lets out for the summer. Even if a parent wanted to buck the trend, he would be hard-pressed to find play dates or stickball companions for his kids. Staying home is for losers, and it's not so great for the parents, either. Gone are the days of kids riding a bike down the block and returning for dinner. Children must be managed, and management is exhausting. It's no wonder so many parents are smiling as the bus pulls out of the lot.

Last summer, after camp ended, we insisted that our son accompany us to my parents' house in Cape Cod, which had expanded as our family multiplied. I am now the same age my father was when he bought the house, yet my mother still asks every morning what I want for dinner. It drives me crazy, but it also reminds me that my childhood is rooted in this home away from home. One morning my son and I biked into town, bought sandwiches at the single grocery store, and ate them on the beach. "Isn't this fun?" I asked, my bare foot knocking against his. "No, Dad, it's boring," he said. "I want to go back to camp."

It hurt me, my son's rejection of my own childhood. I wanted him to have the freedom I had, to lay down the foundations for his adult life and not be bound by some artificial construct of childhood. But I realized that childhood as we know it has always been a constructed phenomenon. My own summers nestled in my parents' second home were just as artificial as my son's camp experience. I didn't want him to have an "authentic" experience; I wanted him to have *my* experience.

So this summer his mother and I are embracing our newfound independence. We've sent his sister to camp, too.

Mr. Stracher is the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review and the author of "Dinner With Dad: How I Found My Way Back to the Family Table."

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit http://www.djreprints.com.