

On the Occasion of the Carbide Camps Reunion – July 14, 2002– Bob Lilley

This is too long – but there's only one 20th reunion - and I think it's important...

I very well could have been riding out to Cliffside for my second year at camp exactly 50 years ago. I'm an old guy. That's pre-60s and pre-70s, pre CDs, pre-color television (almost pre-television!), pre-Elvis... "Thank you very much..."

I am Cliffside 51-53; Camelot 54-56 and then a couple years as JC and CIT. With thanks to Cliffside as the "starter set", my memories are Camelot-centric, since in those decades we were not even supposed to *think* about just how close we were to a *girls'* camp...! Carlisle was supposed to be a theoretical concept, except for a much anticipated and well-chaperoned movie night.

*"... this is the heart of Camelot;
not these stones, not these timbers, these palaces and towers.
Burn them all and Camelot lives on, because it lives in us.
Camelot is a belief that we hold in our hearts."* *"First Knight"*

...It was in the days of Uther Pendragon...each session, in the Castle, Frank Black would "do the tell", and remind us of the traditions and legends that would be the pattern for our next two weeks. And he would explain the "rules" – the modern-day code of chivalry. ...Use the steps; don't walk up and down the grass banks...

The reason my camp counselor career was cut short was that Carbide moved my family to England in 1959. My wife and I have repeatedly visited there since.

We walked the angry gray coast at Tintagel where the legend says Arthur was born over a thousand years ago. Where he was spirited away by Merlin "through the postern gate" (yes, it's there).

Drove past Stonehenge one sunny day to stand on the Cadbury hill-fort site that some say was King Arthur's Camelot, and saw the Severn valley, with the Glastonbury Tor in the distance and felt to the point of tears the presence of those magic times that keeps the legends and stories alive and relevant today.

We rode toward Glastonbury over the fields and farms that were the Severn's marshes and misty moors a hundred fifty decades ago and over which Merlin and Arthur escaped, the boy-Arthur to be taught the ways of Nature and of Man and later to become King with Merlin's help.

Over the bridge and past the lake – the lady dressed in white samite, remember? – where it is said Excalibur is held in safekeeping against a future need. And into Glastonbury, as close as we in the "real" world will get to the city's other dimension, Avalon, the mystical goal; nirvana, valhalla, heaven. It is said Arthur and Guinevere were buried here, and we saw what real evidence exists, in "our" dimension.

And, we saw the "evidence" along the Camel River of Arthur's last battle and were reminded of the accidental tragedy of his death. By then, however, Arthur's spark was glowing; some organization had taken root, and might no longer was unquestionably "right".

Alas, we did not get to Carlisle, in the North, but we'll fix that in time.

True? Much of it probably only legend, or metaphor, but it's good enough. Don't get too hung up on the history. It only confuses us. We're romantics and sentimentalists, not true scholars, I guess...

Just how is all of this relevant? Well, Arthur's England, no matter what Lerner and Lowe and Alfred. Lord Tennyson and "First Knight" tell us, had to be a chaotic and dangerous and somewhat unbeautiful place. Post-Roman England featured near-constant battle among many small kingdoms and fiefdoms; travelers were exposed to robbers and mayhem, and we can imagine that any sort of overall "progress" was minimal at best. So, whether a single "Arthur" led the change or not, an "arthurian period" certainly happened, bringing at least some order out of chaos -- a level of organization and public safety which could let commerce and government take hold and begin building a society out of the tribes. Now, it's probably not really important to the story whether the public was safer from dragons literally, or just from each other, is it?

We remember the Carbide Camps and we can tell the same story again. We visit Cliffside, and at first are disappointed or outraged that the ground we consecrated with our growing up has changed so much. We cannot go home again. Remnants of Cliffside remain, mostly hidden among newer construction and fewer memories. But with the wisdom that age invites, we visit, and we understand better now that the new neighborhood is looked-after -- cared for by that combined blessing that so many Cliffside campfires conferred... "We're thankful for days, and the joys that they give us, for nights and the rest that they bring..." Times change, stuff happens, but the days and nights, joys and rest continue.

When I re-visited the Camelot and Carlisle sites on Blue Creek after 50 years I worked to "prove" to myself that this was indeed the spot. The flagstones remaining at Carlisle, the toppled entry gateposts at Camelot, a small cement foundation from the rifle range, and an old bedspring were about all I found, but they were enough. For a while, I sat next to a big tree near where the Camelot footbridge once stood and cried like a baby.

Charleston Newspapers' Karin Vingle said it with such feeling:

*"...it seems impossible that it's gone.
Impossible that bulldozers flattened such a special place.
That kudzu and rhododendron have overtaken campfire circles,
choked out footpaths, and erased those few things the dozers passed by."*

But while it's still emotional for me, it's not really quite so sad any more. I tried (one more time) to "go home again" and was hurt -- again. But we are the future. For example, Karin's article ended with a hopeful call for all of us to support the "Send a child to camp" program. The future. Thanks, Karin.

For me, there's a direct parallel between that Arthurian legend and the camps. We were campers at a time in our lives when chaos and order were equally available to us. To begin the camping experience was to "get away from home and parents and rules" only to find that other sets of rules and leaders were "out there" and they were necessary to our growing up and for learning the art of cooperation that makes for progress.

At the personal level, we may have learned that "might does not make right".

I believe that every minute of my life has been affected by those experiences; by the realization that "fun" is *more* fun when others are involved and there are some guidelines and rules to the game; that work is more satisfying when a *team* gets the job done; that the ability to make new friends and make new memories may be part of what is uniquely human in us. All that, inspired by two Summer weeks each year? You bet!

Scott Mease said in his 1984 letter to the Charleston Gazette that we probably remember the camps as "more and more perfect than they really were"; the memories and stories get better with the retelling. Of course they do. England prospered after Arthur helped "get its act together." We prospered partly because the camps experience helped us to avoid some of the dumb and chaotic choices that were available to us. I believe we are *making* the camps more perfect and more meaningful, with each passing day, with each wise choice we continue to make.

Where are they now? The likes of George Gibbs and Bob Byus and Steve Casey and Jeanette Farrell – oops – new name around our house -- another story from so long ago. I've heard from Charlie Katholi and probably a hundred others -- Kris Sales Dunlap and Patty Harmon and the Barnas and even John Goetz IV and Steve Ball, speaking of the "Sons of the Pioneers".

I started carbidecamps.net because of my own desire to see if there were others with memories out there to help me relive those remembered times. I am deeply moved that this "scrapbook" has touched so many, and reminded us just how worthwhile those summers were. I met Randy Rice and his family because of the site. I have shared a laugh and a tear with more than one contributor of pictures or messages or memories. Thanks to all of you for caring.

*Ask every person if he's heard the story
And tell it strong and clear if he has not;
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory,
That was known as Camelot...*

Lerner and Lowe, "Camelot"

We sometimes think in terms of monuments. No need in this case – *we are* the monuments. As at Cliffside, whatever *is* eventually built on the foundations of Camelot and Carlisle, will be built on our strong shoulders -- will be looked after by the spirit of the place -- our spirit. We hold that spirit forever, kept safe and warm for future needs.

Camelot, and Carlisle and Cliffside and Carbide live! Tell the story "strong and clear" to your children and their children, and those magic times will live on and on.

Good show, campers and counselors and staff. Good show, Carbide.

"You can't go home again" Thomas Wolfe – d. 37 yrs old, in 1938

Arthur's period is often described as circa 475 AD to 515-542 – various dates of Camlann battle