

CAMPER PROFILE
AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE RETTSTADT (1925-2018)
BY ANNE DANDO OLDFIELD

This interview took place after the September 2017 reunion; George died the following May



As we approach the holiday season, our thoughts often turn to food, glorious food, and the wonderful memories that a whiff of deliciousness can invoke. Did you ever stop to consider what went on behind the scenes in the Hagan kitchen? I don't remember the next meal ever being a concern at camp, but when you consider the fact that the Hagan kitchen cranked out three meals a day, all summer long, for over 300 people, staffed by a group of 15-21 year old boys and two lovely stewardesses, all under the oversight of one adult supervisor, it becomes a marvel. Nancy and Judi Hartman, Barb Dando and I recently had the pleasure of

locating and interviewing 91-year-old George Rettstadt, the food supervisor for the River Camps from 1960 until their closure in 1979. Our mission was to discover just what it took to successfully manage a camp kitchen.

A Bit about George

(Photo right: Young George in plaid shirt in the Hagan Kitchen)

As a young man, George served in the United States Navy, stationed in the South Pacific. It was there that he received his initial culinary training and developed an interest in the food industry. After being honorably discharged, George worked as a chef at a now defunct resort near Mount Pocono, PA. In a career move to elevate his managerial training, he oversaw several summer, sport and scout camps in the region. Following his tenure at the River Camps, George catered a private school in New Jersey and special events for a year until he opened Rettstadt's Farmhouse, his own rustic, fine dining restaurant located in South Sterling, PA near Tobyhanna State Park. While at Hagan, George was an early proponent of the farm to table movement by supporting and purchasing produce from the local farmers and procuring our beloved Sunday pastries from Stroudsburg area bakeries. George is now retired from a successful career in the restaurant business and is enjoying time in his garden and special visits from friends.



George, what brought you to Camp Hagan?

"In 1959, I responded to an advertisement in a Philadelphia newspaper and was hired by Food Crafters as food supervisor for a cluster of camps in the nearby Pocono Mountains. That began my long affiliation with camps Hagan, Miller, Ministerian, Hugh Beaver and Hidden Lake. The first year was like throwing the baby into the swimming pool. Hiring and training practices by

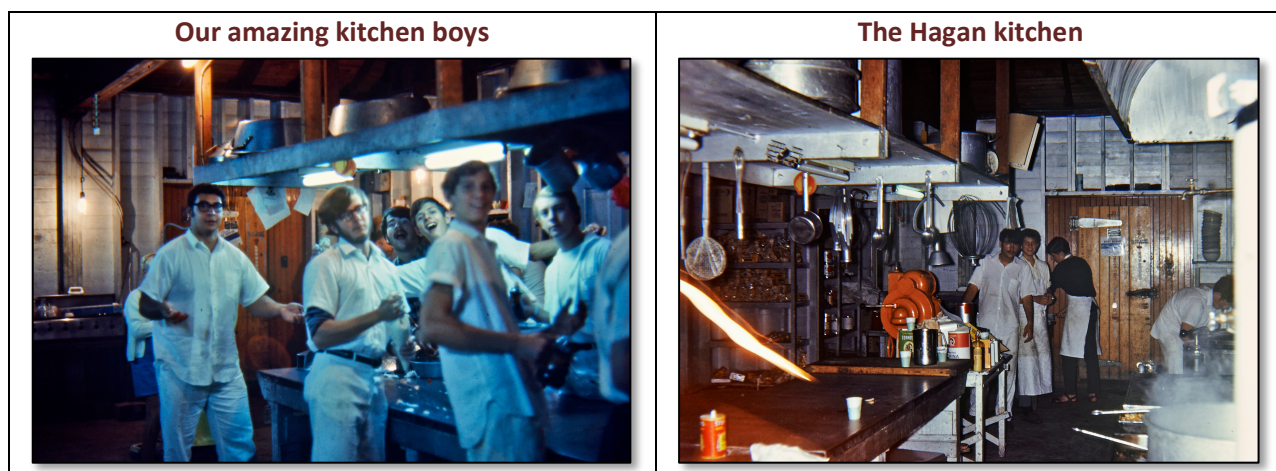
the oversight company were disorganized and disastrous. The cooks that they hired were unreliable. They could cook, but not manage a kitchen. The first pay check and they were gone and you were stuck! The only people you had in the kitchen to take over were cook's helpers who knew nothing about cooking. In one instance at Hagan, this son-of-a-gun kept the kids in the kitchen and went up and robbed all their things, taking radios and emptying the money right out of their pants pockets before taking off with a friend. That's the kind of things that happened! When they took off, the second cook had to take over and they had no training. I had to take the chance of training the 2nd and 3rd cooks, and moved them up the ladder while I was building a referral system that guaranteed a returning, reliable staff."

How did you find your workers?

"Each one led to another and they had friends. Of course, there were referrals from the church and boys from the Scranton and Bethlehem area came up to camp to apply and interview. Over the years, they kept moving up the line, wrote down the recipes and did a good job! You could depend on them. They could manage the kitchen boys because they were one."

What was your favorite Hagan meal?

"The Hagan Christmas turkey dinner was a fine thing. The boys took great pride in doing it and making sure the meal was good. This was the big thing. You girls lit up and fixed Great Hall so nice with the tree and all and it was always a beautiful thing! When you stop and look today and see what they did then...in those days, the food arrived as whole turkeys and hams with the bone in, etc. Everything was made from scratch, not like the pre-packaged, ready to cook meals of today. Even the rolls were homemade. There is no personal pride in those commercial products and those boys were proud of what they did. They did a fine job considering their ages and lack of training. It had quite an influence on them. Several of the young people went on to culinary institutes and became chefs."



Speaking of your boys, what impact did you have on their development?

"I was very attached to my kids. Don't forget that I had girls too at my other camps. You have to realize that some of these kids worked for me from the time they were 14 or 15 until they

graduated from college. They were like my own kids. You don't realize how close you get with these people when you have them every summer...you get awfully attached. Many of them still stop by, write or call once a year. It was a fine thing that they thought so much of me. The kitchen experience led some into careers in the food industry. Dick Brunner became a Professor at the University of Michigan in Hotel Restaurant Management and several went on to attend culinary institutes. I am proud of the influence that I had on their lives. That's what helped to put them on their way."

How did you manage to keep the kitchen boys in line at an all girls' camp?

"I was strict in a sense. I used to go in and check on them to make sure they kept things neat and in order. The Penthouse was provided by the camp and it wasn't the best place. I can remember going to the Penthouse on a very hot, sticky day and the boys were having a pillow fight. Some of the pillows had broken and there were feathers all over the place from top to bottom. It was quite a sight. You know, when you get to be old, you look back and memories brighten your day because of the humor of it."



George and the boys would make a special cake each summer for Hagan's Birthday

Tell us about the time you rescued a Hagan overnight at Tobyhanna State Park

(Two girls were having serious asthmatic attacks during a rainy overnight at Tobyhanna when counselor Linda Gundelsheimer called George, knowing that he lived nearby, to see if they could get out of the rain and shelter at his house.)

"Kevin Wilson helped to paint my house that summer and I got this call and it was raining like mad and they couldn't get the camp truck because it was in New Jersey getting the boys. So, I said to Kevin, we have to get the girls... 50 girls...and I don't know how many trips we made getting them. They just had a ball. I got the fireplace going and they had a grand time in the house. In the morning, I got up early and went to this little general store up the road and I must

have emptied their shelves and got as much as I could. There were kids having breakfast in my house all over the place. It was a fun night and I never regretted it. The truck came and got them in the morning, and I was worn out! I guess I called up my assistant and said to take care of things because I was too tired to come in. It was just one of those great memories! To this day I still have a big card that all the girls signed thanking me for rescuing them."

Final thoughts?

"It was a good life...I loved camping. I just loved it, actually! It was a tough job and not an easy situation. It kept me going seven days a week. I certainly do wish camp Hagan a very Happy 80th Birthday and many more. It has been a pleasure."

A few reflections from one of George's kitchen boys, Bob Wilson

"I had the opportunity to see George this fall with Barb and Anne's help. George had a beautiful farmhouse restaurant in his home for years but has downsized in his 90's! We would all (Pat, Jim Woscure, Tom et al.) go up over Christmas vacation and spend a few nights snowmobiling and drinking beer (from a separate "beer" fridge) and catch up on old times. It was an unexpected blessing to recently sit with him and thank him for the guidance and life lessons learned at an early age...work habits, cleanliness, responsibility. He was generous with our pay and always took us to the best restaurants in the Poconos so that we would know good food and service. I am preparing for Thanksgiving dinner as I write this, but it always reminds me of Hagan Christmas, and it is a joy to prepare, effortless and fulfilling as I remember George and the women who helped me become a man."



The Boys of Summer - Jimmy, Bobby, Pat, Tommy