



Sandwiching in History Tour

Camp Ouachita Girl Scout Camp Historic District

Lake Sylvia Recreation Area, near Perryville

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Hi! Welcome to another Sandwiching in History tour. I'm Ashley Sides, and today we're at a very special place that holds a lot of fond childhood memories for many women in our state. It's the historic Camp Ouachita Girl Scout camp on the bluffs overlooking scenic Lake Sylvia in Perry County. Now, the Girl Scouts haven't used the camp in over 40 years. It's been through periods of neglect and changes of management, but it's under new management by the Arkansas State Parks system, and its future is very bright. So please join me now as we explore the history of this National Register historic district.

The Girl Scouts were founded in 1912 in Georgia by Juliette Gordon Low. The organization spread rapidly throughout the country as troops were formed in other states in the following years. The first Girl Scout camp was established in New York in 1922. It was a time when

organized camping was enjoying great popularity in the United States, and by the mid-1930s, there were close to 1,000 Girl Scout camps nationwide.

The Girl Scouts came to Arkansas in 1927. Troops proliferated and membership grew rapidly during the Great Depression. Since 1928, the Little Rock Girl Scout Council's troops had been taking turns using Camp Quapaw, a Boy Scout camp in Saline County. But they were only permitted one camping session each summer. From the very beginning, they wanted a camp of their own.

In 1936 they got what they were looking for. Little Rock Area Girl Scout Council President Sue Worthen Ogden obtained a permit from the U.S. Forest Service to establish a camp in the Ouachita National Forest on Narrow Creek, near Thornburg in Perry County. At this spot, the creek tumbled through a deep, rocky ravine known as "the Narrows," where the Forest Service had been toying with the idea of building a dam to create a lake in the valley behind it. If constructed, the dam would create the ideal conditions for a camp that Mrs. Ogden had been looking for. The Girl Scouts' interest in a camp justified the investment in building the dam, so both projects went forward in a symbiotic relationship.

It was the middle of the Great Depression, and President Roosevelt's New Deal had established work relief programs to put unemployed people to work while investing in public infrastructure. Between 1936 and 1937, the Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, constructed the Narrow Creek Dam and cleared the future lake site for the U.S. Forest Service.

The lake was full by June of '37, and the Forest Service named it Lake Sylvia upon Ogden's recommendation. The idea came after she had heard a speech about the ideal Girl Scout, titled "Who is Sylvia? What is She?" inspired by lines from Shakespeare. The Forest Service would go on to operate a public campsite and swimming area on the south side of the lake.

Meanwhile, on the north side of Lake Sylvia, the Works Progress Administration, or WPA, began working on the Girl Scout Camp. It was built in stages under three successive WPA work projects from 1936, '37, and '38 respectively, and was finally completed in 1940. The Girl Scouts had to pay for furnishings, equipment, most of the materials, and some labor, for which they raised over \$10,000. The WPA funded another \$64,000, mostly for labor.

The Girl Scout Council hired the Little Rock architectural firm Thompson, Sanders, and Ginocchio to design the buildings, with Frank Ginocchio as the project architect. Following guidelines from the National Parks and the Forest Service to adapt buildings to their local environment, using native building materials and a simple style, he designed the camp buildings in the WPA's favored Rustic Style. The structures were built out of local fieldstone and native cypress logs. They featured battered fieldstone walls; broadly pitched, gabled roofs, covered with hand-split cypress shingles; and exposed hewn-log framework.

The camp was laid out according to the unit plan, which the Girl Scouts had perfected as a healthy and effective arrangement for camping purposes. A common area with a Great Hall

(named Ogden Hall after Sue Ogden), infirmary, and service buildings was surrounded by four individual, self-contained units for grouping the campers by age, each of which had its own unit house (or troop house), bath house and latrine, and six cabins each. The units came to be called Lake View, Tall Timber, Echo Valley, and Cliff Top.

The first camp session took place in 1937. The cabins had not been built yet, so the campers used tents that first year. Tent camping on raised platforms remained available for certain occasions even after the cabins were completed. One of these tent sites was called Toltec and shared Lake View's facilities. An independent fifth unit was added across the lake in 1959 called Atihcauo (pronounced Ah-tea-KI-o with a long "I" in KI), which had no cabins and offered primitive camping to older girls, who had to access it by canoe.

Camp Ouachita drew Girl Scouts from across Arkansas and even neighboring states. There were two-week camp sessions, one-week sessions, and even weekend camps. Activities varied by age and skill level, with each unit hosting a different age group and interest focus. Some units emphasized water activities, like canoeing and sailing. Others honed backpacking and campcraft skills, while still others taught lifesaving skills or trained future camp counselors.

The base for each group's activities was their unit house, where they might have nature talks, duty assignments (called kapers), arts and crafts, rainy-day games, receiving mail from home, or gather around the fireplace on a chilly evening. There was no electricity in the camp until 1950, and then it just served the Great Hall, infirmary, icehouse, and caretaker's residence. Campers got around in the dark by candle, torch, or flashlight.

Girls were paired up and went everywhere by the buddy system, whether to the unit house, the bath house, the waterfront, or their cabin for the night. Bath houses included a long washbasin, latrine, and showers, which were cold as the water came straight from the lake. Laundry had to be done the old-fashioned way, with a wash pan and water heated over a fire.

Swimming was one of the highlights of camp. Strong swimmers were allowed go as far as the buoys and use the diving boards that floated on rafts in the deep water, but inexperienced swimmers had to stay in the two shallow swim cribs that were enclosed by a seawall topped with a catwalk.

Although most activities were done within the individual units, the whole camp came together at Great Hall for meals and other assemblies like talent shows and religious services. The bell called the camp to mealtime, where girls sat eight to a table and were served by their counselor. After eating, they drew chore assignments to sweep up, wash and dry the dishes, and put them away.

The Girl Scouts intended the camping experience to develop girls "along physical, emotional, mental, moral, and social lines, to the end that there may result not only a personally enriched

individual, but also an intelligently participating citizen in a democratic social order.”¹ They practiced useful skills such as cooking, swimming, lifesaving, foraging, fire building, and camp chores within the context of a community where they also built friendships and grew as leaders and citizens. Camping stripped away many comforts of life and made space for intensely formative experiences.

Campers had to leave radios at home but were allowed to bring musical instruments and cameras. There was no heat or air conditioning in the cabins, and showers were cold. Snakes, frogs, spiders, and mosquitoes were an unavoidable part of life at a forest campsite, but the context transformed these inconveniences from “bugs” to features! As one camper wrote home: “Dear Mom and Dad, I’m having a great time. Today we found a nest of baby copperheads behind the cabin and some scorpions in the bath house. I’m covered with chigger bites. Camp is fun. Love, Becky.”²

Water had always been a problem for the camp, though. Wells did not produce sufficient water, and they often failed, and so Lake Sylvia water was used. Water would be pumped up to the top of the hill to the pump house, from which gravity would take it down to the toilets and the bath houses in the camp below. However, in the late 1970s, new public health regulations prohibited the use of the lake water. The Girl Scouts were having a hard time affording the upkeep on the on the camp at this time anyway. And so, in January 1979, they chose not to renew their land use permit with the Forest Service. After 41 years of Girl Scout camping, Camp Ouachita was officially closed. The 1978 summer camp session had been the last.

The Forest Service also found the camp too costly to deal with, so it was neglected. Between 1982 and 1986, they authorized other organizations in the region to demolish some of the structures and salvage the fieldstone for reuse. This led to the removal of the boat house, Atihcauo unit house, two of the Echo Valley cabins and bath house, and the stone floors from some of the other structures.

But in 1986, the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program found the camp eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, so demolition was halted. Camp Ouachita was finally listed on the National Register as a historic district with local significance. When it was realized that Camp Ouachita is the only remaining WPA-built Girl Scout camp in the United States, its National Register listing was elevated to national significance in 2002.

Meanwhile, it had continued to deteriorate. Limited work had been done in the ‘90s to the caretaker’s residence and the Great Hall’s roof. Between 2001 and 2007 the Great Hall was fully rehabilitated, and the Lake View unit’s cabins and bath house were renovated and converted into public camping cabins. A few other structures in the other units got new roofs to slow their decline and save them for future restoration.

¹ (Nichols and Wilcox 2002, sec. 8 p. 3)

² (Silva 2013, 13)

Over the years since then, Camp Ouachita has hosted many weddings, annual trail races, and other events. A church-based ministry operated the camp for a few years after 2016. But there had been few substantial improvements since 2007.

There's new hope for the future, though. The Lake Sylvania Recreation Area, including Camp Ouachita, is now part of the Arkansas State Parks system, and this is good news for the public. I asked Park Superintendent Molly Elders to talk about the condition of this historic camp, including the vulnerable part that's off limits, as well as the part that's been restored for public use.

MOLLY

Hi, I'm Molly Elders. I'm a park superintendent with Arkansas State Parks. I'm standing here today in Camp Ouachita, which is a historic district that is located in the new operational section of Arkansas State Parks known as Lake Sylvania Recreation Area. In July 2021 Arkansas State Parks signed a lease with the U.S. Forest Service to take over operations and management of this district, which included the Lake Sylvania Recreation Area, which is our swimming beach, and included the campgrounds of Lake Sylvania. And it also includes Camp Ouachita, our historic district. And we're here today with Arkansas State Parks to try and help continue the preservation of this area.

The neat thing about Camp Ouachita is that there was a certain portion of it that was kept up and rehabilitated that is currently open to our guests, and those facilities are up and running, but we have a big portion of Camp Ouachita, which is the old Girl Scout camp that, as you see around me, is still remaining in the woods.

Right now I'm standing in a portion of the park that is closed to the public. Some of these structures are in different states of decay, just depending on their locations. Some of these have already gotten new roofs, so you can tell that they're standing pretty well. But if you can see behind me this way, other ones have been taken back by the forest. And so there are roughly 40 structures throughout the woods back here that are still standing that State Parks is working to preserve the status of. But right now, a lot of our focus is on maintaining what has been kept up with. These buildings have not yet been made secure and safe for visitors to get down here. So this area is closed off right now, but at some point, we will be able to open it up for guests, to give tours, to show off what is remaining in the preservation that we're working towards.

One of my favorite parts about this historic district is it seems like people really did kind of forget about it. So we still have a lot of artifacts remaining. Of the remaining structures that we have at Camp Ouachita, there are predominantly three different types, one being the cabins where the Girl Scouts would sleep, their residences. And that's what you see behind me right here, and then also next to it. Those are what we have the most of, of course. And then the other type of building we have is the restrooms, or the bath houses. This building right here—it's missing its porch—that was an old bath house. And this other one you can see through the woods, that's facing us, that's another bathhouse house as well.

The Girl Scouts really, really fortified their camping patterns into unit camping. And so that meant that each unit slept different age girls and had their own accommodations to them. And so we had cabins in one unit, we had a bath house in one unit, and we had the last remaining structure, a troop house, which from where we're standing—it's kind of difficult to see one of them—if you look down there through the woods, there are structures of it. The troop houses had it the worst, because they were screened in predominantly, because that's where they had their activities. So those have certainly had the biggest impact when it comes to nature attacking back at these structures that have been built out here.

Another really neat thing about this area is that, as you can see behind me, this is really a fourth structure, if I wanted to include it: The Girl Scouts also had tents, platform camping. And so these piers that we see, there was a wooden platform on top, and they built a canvas structure to sleep under the stars. We can find these structures scattered throughout among the different units that we have here.

And then behind me, if you haven't noticed, this is this is a true artifact: We do still have a bed here. In a bunch of the cabins, we still have lots of artifacts that are, you know, significant and tell such a good story. And so they haven't been moved. That's one thing that we're working on is trying to determine the allowance to allow visitors to come in while still being able to leave stuff like this available because nothing tells a better story. You know, somebody slept here!

Now we are standing in the portion of Camp Ouachita that is open for our guests. This is the unit grouping called Lake View that the Girl Scouts camped in. This area includes six cabins, a seventh cabin that was renovated from a bath house, and then this, what we refer to as The Patio, is one of the old troop houses. The reason this one is so far gone—we only have the stones left—is most of this was all wood structure. So that was that was long gone by the time initial groups in 2002 started to work towards the preservation of this area.

Since July of 2021, when Arkansas State Parks took the place over, we've been working diligently on the many repairs that were needed throughout this area. So what you see today is what we have to offer: these seven cabins, the Great Hall, which is located over this way—it is going to be open; it's not open right now. We're still working on some renovations, but it will be open for events to the public as well as a commercial kitchen that is attached to it.

One of my favorite parts about working at this park so far has been the stories that have come out of this. You know, these cabins housed hundreds of girls throughout the years that came down here and stayed. And on top of that, the history of that, we're still working on finding. And so when I do have people that come down here and say, "Oh, I was here as a Girl Scout," you know, I love to hear those stories because we're trying to collect. Because the community really cares a lot about this place. Even the people that didn't attend the camp in particular, the locals come down and they were so interested during construction, offering to volunteer and wanting to get involved, knowing when it was open, you know, offering any type of help that I needed, especially as a new person to the area.

These cabins, too, what's fun is they're all named something, so it makes them a little more personable. The donors that helped build these cabins, initially, their names are still on them. So I've got a Carolyn, a Ruby, a Netty. Oh, I could go on and on... There's a Molly back in the woods; she's still standing a little bit...

But I can showcase—actually, we're at a good spot—some of the community efforts that have gone into. The first week we were open, I had guests come stay, and they came and stayed every weekend following for the next three or so weekends. And while they were here, they stayed in the same cabin. This is Carolyn Cabin. And, you know, they didn't have to do this, but they made this little area very cute. This was not us working on it. We put the grill in, but all this rock work is something that they've worked on. So that little bit of touch to each of these cabins is all so—it's very precious because this place is full of lots of stories and lots of memories for people.

ASHLEY

Camp Ouachita has always had a special place in the hearts of Arkansans—and not just Girl Scouts. It's nice to know that this historic site is being taken care of and made accessible—at least partially—to the public. There are seven cabins available to rent now—maybe more someday—and even if some of the amenities are still a work in progress, the same beautiful lake and scenic Ouachita National Forest trails that enchanted generations of Girl Scouts are always right outside the cabin doorstep, ready for visitors to come make their own memories.

You can even bring your radio.

Next month we're presenting our first ever tour in Montgomery County. We'll take you down to see a couple of historic general stores in Pine Ridge that achieved national fame for decades as the fictional setting for a popular radio show. It's the Huddleston Store and McKinzie Store, better known as the Lum & Abner Jot 'Em Down Store and Museum. We'll see you then!

For more information about the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, go to [ArkansasPreservation.com](https://arkansaspreservation.com).

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