

Whitewater Stories Podcast Transcript

May 2020 - Episode 1: Visitor Stories

Podcast audio can be found online at mndnr.gov/whitewater. Episode length: 16:53.

Host: **Sara Holger**, Lead Interpretive Naturalist at Whitewater State Park

John Weiss, retired outdoor writer for the Rochester Post Bulletin newspaper

Arash Shambayati, park visitor/fisherman

Caryl Riska, park visitor/camper

Cadence Simmons, park visitor/camper

Curt Buck, park volunteer

Sage Grover, park visitor, 4-H camp counselor

Jesse Rorabough, park visitor/camper

Andrea Richards, park visitor/camper

Melissa Bernhard, park visitor/camper

Ruth Collins, park visitor/camper

Steve and Diane Harrison, Campground host volunteers

Natalie Arend, park visitor

Jack Holger, park visitor

Transcript:

Sara Holger: Have you ever thought of camping as therapy? Or more specifically as an anecdote to divorce woes? What about visiting a park to find love? Do you have a special secret place outdoors where you go to get away from the hectic stress of the busy world and to find solitude and peace? Whitewater State Park in Minnesota has provided countless visitors with these sorts of experiences. Whitewater State Park is one of 75 state parks in Minnesota, each with a rich history. Stick around for our podcast to learn more about this special place.

[acoustic guitar music]

Hello! I'm Sara Holger, an Interpretive Naturalist at Whitewater State Park. Since 1919, Whitewater State Park has been providing exceptional outdoor experiences for families, youngsters and people of all ages. During the summer of 2017, I, along with a team of volunteers, gathered

stories from park visitors and local residents about their memories of this special place. The stories we collected have been woven together to create this podcast series. I invite you to sit back and relax as you listen to this edition of Whitewater Stories.

John Weiss: Actually, the discovery of Whitewater, one of the great discoveries of my life. I actually got a job down at the Rochester Post Bulletin. I began November of '75. My wife Debbie, was in the cities; I met her at a lake near Brainerd. And so we were lakes-people. We came down to Rochester and we thought, "What is this? What did we get ourselves into?" Gordy Yeager, who was the outdoor writer at the time, said, "Just head east of 14, hit 74 and take a left." Okay, we did. I remember Debbie and I drove and all of a sudden *whistles* wow, this is a neat place! And I slowly, fell in love with the blufflands mostly through my first look at Whitewater. But I was just enthralled by it, and I found I enjoyed moving water. 'Cause lakes sit there, moving water is always jumping around and it's doing something crazy to you and I really fell in love. And I like the bluffs, and I really fell in love with the bluffs. I like going back to Brainerd, of course, and the lakes. But the bluffs is where I call home now.

Sara Holger: That was John Weiss, a journalist and fan of Whitewater State Park describing what he felt when he first discovered the park back in 1975. One of John's favorite Whitewater activities is fishing. Trout fishing is very popular at Whitewater, as Arash Shambayati explains.

How long have you been coming to Whitewater?

Arash

Shambayati: It's been a least 20 years. I came here with my cousin and my best friend, both of whom came also from Iran. And we all went to school at Hamline together and we came to go fishing.

Sara Holger: And what was your early impression of this park?

Arash

Shambayati: No mosquitos, that's a bonus. And fishing was ridiculously good. We use, we use small bobbers and small hooks and live bait, usually, either trout worms-or in the winter time, we come here a lot in the winter too, wax worms. And they love 'em. And in the springtime for opener, there's what they call water-worms. And trout go crazy for them here. So if the water-worms are in season, fishing is always good. So we're here once or twice a month.

Sara Holger: Oh wow, that's really cool. So after the flood of 2007, what were some big changes you noticed around the park?

Arash

Shambayati: A lot of the fishing holes were gone...

Sara Holger: Yeah.

Aras

Shambayati: ...but there was still good fishing.

Sara Holger: Caryl Riska also remembers the 2007 flood; she was camping with her family when the flood hit.

Caryl Riska: My daughter and I were playing games. The grandchild was sleeping and the couple that was with us were sleeping in the tent.

Sara Holger: Okay.

Caryl Riska: So it was just the two of us up playing the games. And somebody came knocking on the camper. And he says, "You have to evacuate. We're evacuating the park." I said, "Ooh, do we have time to pack up the camper." He said, "I don't know." I says, "that's my answer." So, I said, "We have to leave now." And we took off in the two cars, we left the camper. We live in Rollingstone. It was like driving through a snow storm because it was raining that hard. We came back the next day just to see. We couldn't get a car in, so we parked by the Visitor Center and walked in. But we had to leave the camper. It was two weeks before I got the camper out. I had to go around the signs that said "road closed."

Sara Holger: And you still come back to camp even after that?

Caryl Riska: Oh yeah!

Cadence

Simmons: I like this place. I like the activities especially.

Sara Holger: Whitewater State Park is a popular spot for the Boy Scouts to experience camping first hand. Curt Buck remembers coming to the park as youth in the 1960s.

Curt Buck: I was a boy scout in Rochester growing up. And every spring for my time in boy scouts, spring camporee was at the Whitewater State Park. And in the early to mid 60s, boy scouting was a big deal in Rochester. So spring camporee there would be five to six hundred boy scouts camped here for the weekend. We camped in the woods among the river. Saturday was just camporee stuff, did activities all over the park. But on Sunday morning, everybody amassed on the road, so there would be 500 boy scouts, full uniforms, big color guard, all the flags in front. And we'd march

to the golf course, the meadow was a golf course then, and they have a stand set there. We'd have flag ceremony, it was just peachy! It was cool to see all those kids there for flag ceremony. One year we were camped here, on Saturday night a huge storm came through. A storm such that was tipping over picnic tables. There were 500 very wet boy scouts, with tents all flat-everybody's tent were blown down because they were all canvas wall tents is what we had then. The next morning, 8 o'clock we were all at flag ceremony at the golf course in full uniform.

Sara Holger: Each year, thousands of boys and girls from near and far experience the wonder and beauty of Whitewater State Park by participating in various scout, 4-H, church and other youth camps held at the park. Local resident, Sage Grover, first participated in Regional 4-H Camp as a 3rd grader back in 2008. After participating as a camper for seven years, she became a camp counselor in 2015. Some of Sage's favorite camp memories are...

Sage Grover: Probably, like, walking across that bridge that's in the meadow like when it's at nighttime and it's like really foggy and there's fireflies.

Sara Holger: And her first year at camp as a camper when there was a severe thunderstorm...

Sage Grover: It was really bad, like tornado warnings, and we had to go into the bathroom and we were in there for like two hours and we had like a little talent show in there because they just wanted to keep us distracted, so...

Sara Holger: And even though there was one year as a camper when she faked sick so she could go home early, Sage recognizes the valuable life skills she has learned through her camp experiences and by being a camp counselor...

Sage Grover: You have to rely on each other, like the teaching sessions, you know, you might learn one thing and you have to trust that the other person is going to hold up their end of it and be able to teach what their supposed to be doing. So you have to trust that, and you have to...you rely on each other even just in the cabins like with the campers, taking care of them, you know. If one person needs to step out for a little bit you need to be able to rely on the other person to help. You learn, I guess, yeah, just in general how to be a leader, how to step up and take charge when something needs to get done or just how to teach other people.

Sara Holger: Youth camps aren't the only ones who have made camping at Whitewater a tradition. The tradition flows through Minnesota families like Jesse Rorabough's.

Awesome!

Jesse

Rorabough: We usually reserve the same sites, in that cove after you go over the bridge.

Sara Holger: Gooseberry campgrounds?

Jess

Rorabough: Yeah. Wet tents, you gotta dry everything out, go to the laundromat. I remember the year it just totally flooded, you couldn't camp at all. We'd have washer boards instead of like bag toss.

Sara Holger: Uh-huh.

Jesse

Rorabough: We had washer board made of the same thing. You lay them on the ground, you go a string in between them...

Sara Holger: Okay.

Jesse

Rorabough: ...three holes and each hole is different points. You got washers that are like that big and you gotta throw them and slide them, try to get them in the hole. It's kind of like skee-ball. We started a tournament out of the whole playing washers.

Sara Holger: So do you have a grand prize for the tournament winner then or what do you...?

Jesse

Rorabough: It's wearing a presidential hat. It's Uncle Sam's hat...

Sara Holger: Oh funny.

Jess

Rorabough: ...that you get to wear and you get to take a picture with Bev, who bought the hat. Been coming here for so long, it's just an annual thing.

Sara Holger: Right. Tradition.

Jess

Rorabough: Everything about it, it's just a great place, good, friendly people. Elba, nice town. You got the St. Charles fireworks, that's a pretty good show.

Sara Holger: Do you guys usually come around Fourth of July every year?

Jesse

Rorabough: Oh yeah! Fourth of July weekend.

[guitar music]

Sara Holger: Biological and created families find Whitewater to be a serene place to reconnect and enjoy each other's company. Like the group that Andrea Richards put together.

Andrea

Richards: Our adventure has been over the last 25 years. And we consider ourselves family. So our family has grown when three gals from work decided to take their kiddos camping way back 25 years ago. 1992 was the year. And we had three friends who were struggling with marriages at the time and deciding that we were not going to let our kids know the difference. So what we did was say, "We're going to have an experience that we can have every year that our families look forward to and we don't need the men to do it."

Sara Holger: And as their kids grew, their traditions blossomed.

Melissa

Bernhard: As we all got older and got married, and our husbands would have to be buried in the sands and then our kids and on and on and on. Everyone basically gets initiated to Whitewater State Park by having to be buried in the sand. Another thing that we would do down by the beach, I remember with my sister Ashley, we would play volleyball, back and forth. The thing we would do as a kids group would be to swim from one side of the river to the other side, to the bank. And we always thought that was so cool because no one else was brave enough to do that because it just seemed, I don't know, too scary on the other side because you didn't know what was lurking under the murky water over there.

Ruth Ann

Collins: One of my favorite memories down by the beach was that everyone lines up in a long straight line, no matter what the age...

Melissa

Bernard: Hand in hand.

Ruth Ann

Collins: ...from the youngest to the oldest, hand in hand and then we count to three and everyone HAS to run in all the way and get wet.

Andrea

Richards: The buoys!

Ruth Ann
Collins: The race to the buoys.

Andrea
Richards: As we got going with our years through camping, our goal was to pitch tents as quickly as possible and how soon can we get down to the beach. And we brought the bicycles and the kids would begin riding their bicycles down and we would begin saying, "Get the hammer please we need the...where'd they go? Where'd they go?" And everybody was down by the beach already. We'd look at each other like, let's get this done so we can go too!

Sara Holger: It's not just traditions with kids that make Whitewater special. Love blooms here too, like it did for Steve and Diane Harrison.

Steve
Harrison: I've been coming since early, early 10-, 11-years-old probably. I have relatives that farm near St. Charles so I would spend two or three weeks or a month with them, in the summertime, helping to farm and we'd come over and use the beach and the hiking trails and chase girls. And then I started chasing this one.

Diane
Harrison: I started coming camping with my family when I was probably about 8-years-old.

Steve
Harrison: When we were dating, in the 60s, she'd come over camping with her family. They had a Honda 90, a little trailer, and I had one. So I'd haul mine over here during the day and we'd ride up to the fire tower. And I'd have to go back home at night.

Diane
Harrison: Yeah. Absolutely!

Steve
Harrison: And come over the next day.

Diane
Harrison: We actually went to prom together and then we came over here after prom. Because it's one of our favorite places. This has been a lifelong favorite for us. You know. The hiking is what brings us here. We had a trailer as a young family and brought our kids over and camped and, consequently, our kids have come here and camped too.

Sara Holger: Steve and Diane aren't the only ones who found love at the park. Natalie Arend and her husband found Whitewater to be the perfect wedding spot.

Natalie

Arend: I moved to Rochester when I was five, grew up in Rochester visiting Whitewater State Park you know, pretty much since I was a kid, going hiking. My brother spends a lot of time fishing there. My now-husband spent a lot of time as a kid hiking there, driving through Elba on their way to the Mississippi River to go fishing and to visit their house boat. It's just kind of a place we both had a common interest in.

Sara Holger: So when did you start talking about Whitewater as a possible sight?

Natalie

Arend: We started talking about it like within that first month...

Sara Holger: Oh awesome!

Natalie

Arend: It was amazing. So we got there a few days early. People kind of settled into their cabins and we had a nice bonfire groom's dinner at the modern group camp there. We grilled burgers and salmon. And then the next morning I got ready at a friend's house who lives right behind Lazy D Campground. And then we used one of the cabins to kind of stage in before we walked out. Set our wedding ceremony up under the oak trees there at the far end of the group camp. And had probably one of the most beautiful ceremonies I think like 100 percent of our guests had ever experienced based on their review of our wedding. And then we ended the night with another big bonfire. So there was lots of guests that had never been to Whitewater or to Minnesota State Parks because we had family from California, we had family from Alaska, We had family from Iowa and Wisconsin. And then of course we got to hear all those stories like, "I haven't been here since I was a kid" or "I was here fifteen years ago." One of the best stories we heard was from a friend of Andy's mother who was there for a Girl Scout camp and they got snowed in and they got stuck there for like three days and it was like the best experience of her entire life.

Sara Holger: Oh my gosh, that's so cool. That's neat that your wedding inspired, hopefully, people to get outdoors.

Natalie

Arend: Oh yeah, everybody I talked to was like, "I had no idea this was here. I had no idea it was this beautiful. I'm going to spend more time camping and hiking and fishing here."

Sara Holger: Visitors young and old agree that Whitewater is a special place, to be preserved for future generations. Even the littlest of visitors, like...

Jack Holger: Jack Carl Steven Holger

Sara Holger: who is age

Jack Holger: three years old.

Sara Holger: Conveyed this sentiment when asked why he thinks Whitewater State Park is so fun...

Jack Holger: because it just is!

[guitar music]

Sara Holger: In its 100 years serving the community, visiting Whitewater State Park has become a tradition, where people find love, joy and serenity. It's no surprise that they want to keep this gem to themselves. Again, frequent visitor Arash...

So if you were talking to somebody who had never been to Whitewater State Park before, what would you tell them as to why they should come here?

Arash

Shambayati: Oh I tell them it's a horrible place, not to come.

Sara Holger: [laughing]

Arash

Shambayati: I tell them to try any of the other parks in Minnesota.

Sara Holger: Because you want to keep it to yourself?

Arash

Shambayati: Absolutely! I would really be hesitant in encouraging other people to come. I really like this for myself.

Sara Holger: Thank you for joining me for this edition of Whitewater Stories. From all of the staff at Whitewater State Park, we hope to see you in the park!