

A Recent History of Sabattis Adventure Camp

Sabattis Adventure Camp is a 1250 acre camp operated by Patriots' Path Council, Boy Scouts of America. The camp was purchased in 1957 by the Watchung Area Council, and opened for business in the summer of 1959. Previously, the property had been operated as a private wilderness retreat, and before that a private summer home for the Charles Daniels family.

The July 2, 1959 edition of The Westfield Leader notes,

From July 11, over 350 boys and leaders will set up wilderness campsites, still in an experimental development stage, the camp is considered unique in that troops select and establish their own sites and operate their own program, food service as if they were on their own in a remote wilderness idea.

Watchung Area Council merged with the Morris - Sussex Area Council in 1999 to form the Patriots' Path Council (PPC). PPC now operates three large camp properties: Mount Allamuchy Scout Reservation in Allamuchy, NJ, Winnebago Scout Reservation in Rockaway, NJ, and Sabattis Adventure Camp (SAC) in Long Lake, NY.

In addition to a summer camp program, an Adirondack high adventure trek program is operated out of SAC. Crews of 8-12 Scouts and leaders are accompanied by a trained Voyageur on a 50 to 100-mile canoe or hiking trek through the Adirondacks. One of SAC's key features is that meals are prepared "Patrol Style," meaning that each patrol of 8-10 Scouts cooks their own meals, using ingredients and recipes provided for them by the camp. Very few Boy Scout camps (perhaps less than a dozen) still provide patrol style meals; almost all camps use dining halls with professional staff to feed campers. Because Boy Scouting is based on the Patrol Method, SAC's proponents feel that patrol style meals strengthen the Methods of Scouting.

The Decline

During PPC's ownership of SAC, capital improvements slowed and maintenance was deferred. By 2010 many of the camp's facilities had fallen into disrepair. At the same time, the general decline in Scouting membership helped cause a decline in SAC's summer camp attendance. Although SAC had seen attendance over 500 Scouts for many summers, 2015, 2016 and 2017 saw a dramatic decline. At the same time, several key SAC facilities had become unusable. Infrastructure was crumbling.

SAC also seemed to be suffering from cultural changes. SAC's program has always put less emphasis on Merit Badges than other summer camps, prioritizing "adventure programs" in the afternoons over advancement programs. Where as Scouts could earn 7 or more Merit Badges in a week at other PPC camps, SAC campers usually earned 3 to 4 Merit Badges. The patrol

cooking also takes more time than a dining hall meal (since the Scouts are doing the meal prep, cooking and cleanup for each meal).

SAC is also much further from our Council than our other camps (about 5 hours from our Council Service Center), and the Adirondack weather is much harsher than what we face in New Jersey. For several months a year the camp is nearly inaccessible, making off-season events difficult to plan and implement.

The Task Force

In the fall of 2016, the Council President created a task force to review the operations of the Sabattis Adventure Camp summer camp program. The task force included members of Council's Program, Properties and Finance Management committees. It also included a number of leaders from units that have historically camped at Sabattis. Appropriate members of the council professional staff provided informational support. The task force met on 4 occasions between September 2016 and August 2017 and held several phone conference update calls. Unfortunately, the task force did not report any intermediate findings to the Executive Board, and most Board members did not know that the "Sabattis Task Force" had been formed.

Although the task force had been nicknamed the "Save Sabattis Task Force," their results came to an alternative conclusion: the Council would be better off if SAC ceased operations.

Beyond the declining camp attendance, the task force found many issues with SAC's infrastructure. Key among these was:

- The massive barn, built in 1910, was no longer structurally sound.
- The camp-wide electric system was ancient and unreliable
- The Doll House (a 2/3rd scale two-story house previously used for female staff housing) was falling apart.
- Funding for program equipment was sporadic at best.
- NYS Health Department concerns about the septic system
- Lack of volunteer engagement
- High staff turnover
- Poor financial results

The task force's final report gave an estimate of \$250,000 for replacement of the electric system alone.

On September 18, 2017 a Special Meeting of the Patriots' Path Council Executive Board was held at the Council offices. Fifty-three members of the Board and two Trustees were in attendance, along with a large number of Council employees. The meeting was quite energetic, and more than a few Board Members had tears in their eyes. A large group of peaceful

protesters gathered on the sidewalk near the PPC offices and displayed various signs and banners asking that SAC remain open.

The meeting opened with the resolution closing SAC:

RESOLVED that Patriots' Path Council will immediately cease summer operations at Sabattis Adventure Camp and will take all steps necessary to retire and/or secure the property, facilities and equipment at SAC.¹

This resolution was motioned and seconded. During the following debate several motions were made to amend the resolution. Most board members did not know that SAC's future was under debate, which led to the following motion:

Whereas the board has not had prior notification of the existence of the "Save the Sabattis" task force and has had no previous information from the task force and whereas the official task force benchmark report card (titled 2016-2020 Sabattis Adventure Camp Task Force Benchmarks) was set up to record results for summer camp operation in 2017, 2018, and 2019, the rush to a final judgement in this special meeting is premature, I move to postpone consideration of the main resolution until after the 2019 camping season to offer time for additional information gathering, discussion and analysis, and the task force can measure the performance of Sabattis through their original schedule.¹

A vote was held on that motion, and it passed by a narrow margin. The meeting was quickly concluded, and Scout Executive Dennis Kohl immediately created "The Sabattis Group" to figure out how to turn SAC around in a short timeframe.

The Sabattis Group

The Sabattis Group was formed and began to address SAC's issues. It was recognized that the key factors underlying many of the issues at SAC were fundraising and volunteer engagement. A contribution website was set up with a goal of \$200,000, and the first work weekend was scheduled for October, 2017.

The key success factor for the The Sabattis Group (TSG) would be the engagement of volunteers. Although SAC had been in trouble for many years, our Scouting volunteers and alumni had not been made aware of the severity of the issues. The September 2017 Board Meeting was an eye-opener for our community, and one of TSG's most important tasks has been to keep our community up to date. Monthly emails to over 500 Scouters, frequent Facebook posts, presentations at Board Meetings, and presence at many PPC events has ensured that SAC remain in peoples' minds.

¹ From the official minutes of the meeting.

The Sabattis Group has also been able to provide support for PPC's Scouting Professionals. Volunteer labor, fundraising, and teamwork have allowed Keith Dlugosz, our PPC Camping Director, and his team of professionals, to focus on strategic opportunities at SAC. Scouting works best when we have volunteers and professionals working together as peers on a team, and this has been the case at Sabattis.

Working with PPC professionals, the Finance Management Committee, and the Camping Committee, the prices for summer camp weeks at SAC were raised to help address the higher costs of operating a remote camp. Scout fees were increased \$50/week, and Leader fees were increased \$100/week. These increases added more than \$20,000 per summer to SAC's income, giving PPC additional flexibility for staff and program equipment.

Work Weekends at Sabattis have taken off, and now provide a significant pool of labor to repair and improve camp facilities. As importantly, work weekends increase SAC's visibility across the Council. Work weekend attendance has been impressive and increasing. In June 2019 we hope to have the biggest work weekend so far, also celebrating the 60th anniversary of camping at Sabattis. We expect over 50 participants.

Sabattis Group fundraising efforts produced \$125,000 from the website. Several additional major gifts were directed towards Sabattis, and the Sustainability and Finance Management committees approved using some of the logging funds (raised through sustainable forestry practices on the Sabattis property) for SAC improvements.

Additionally, several large "gifts in kind" (e.g., a pickup truck) have also been donated. Entact Environmental donated the labor and equipment costs for the barn demolition. All the material for the camp's rewiring was donated, as well.

2018 Results

SAC had strong attendance in 2018, with 470 youth and 138 adults in our resident camp program. Twenty treks included 118 youth and 50 adults. **These attendance numbers, along with the increased fees, provided a net positive financial return to PPC.**

The BSA's Annual Camp Inspection gave Sabattis Adventure Camp a grade of 100%. The Trek program scored 99%, and the NYS Department of Health gave SAC an A.

SAC Infrastructure Improvements

As of the start of summer camp 2019, the following camp improvements have been made:

- The old barn has been demolished.

- The new barn's foundation has been poured, and the construction materials for the new 35' x 70' steel building have been delivered; we expect the new barn to be erected and in operation before summer camp. The new barn will also feature a 14' x 70' covered outdoor area which can be used for program.
- The entire camp's electrical system has been replaced. All old buried cables have been replaced with new donated cabling; all old fuse panels have been replaced with modern breaker panels. There is no old electric system in the camp at this time. **This was done at NO COST to PPC.**
- The Trek Center renovation is complete, and a new roof covering the porch has been constructed.
- A large pavilion was built next to the Trek Center to provide an outdoor area for trek crews to plan their adventures.
- A 40' x 70' open steel pavilion was erected to replace the canvas "circus tent" in the middle of camp.
- A covered archery range (donated by the Woapalanne Lodge and constructed by the Flintlocks) is ready for action.
- The Trading Post, Ranger Shed and Generator Shed roofs have been covered with steel roofing.
- A new computer network has been implemented, connecting all major buildings in camp with a telephone network and WiFi connectivity.
- The septic system was found to be operational.
- A new observatory has been built in camp, along with a sophisticated computer-controlled telescope system.
- The Camp Office bathroom has been completely remodeled.
- A winter boat storage rack was constructed.
- Over two dozen new signs have been mounted all over camp to help newcomers find their way.
- The Trading Post has been refurbished with new flooring and brand new store fixtures. A back door has been added to encourage one-way flow of Scouts.
- Three 30 yard dumpsters have been filled with "stuff" from around camp.

Program Improvements

SAC had suffered from turnover in the Camp Director position for several years. Fortunately in early 2018 we were able to hire Dr. Van Anderson as Sabattis Adventure Camp Director. Van has over 30 years experience leading Scout camps, and has lead and taught at many BSA National Camp Schools. Van has ensured that our camp policies and procedures were top notch, and he has led the efforts to recruit a strong staff. We had a great staff in 2018 with no significant issues, and the staff for 2019 looks even stronger. In 2019 Sabattis was the first PPC camp to be fully staffed for the upcoming summer.

Our trek program continues to be a shining example of what can be done in the Adirondacks. Ian Craig joins us again as Trek Director; his new position at Paul Smith's College has opened

up new recruiting avenues, and our trek program is stronger than ever. Week One treks sold out months ago, and we project 2019 as another major success for Ian and his voyageurs.

Some great improvements have been made to our program:

- In 2019, the entire camp will gather in the new central pavilion for lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; this will encourage camp-wide spirit and provide an opportunity for staff and Troop leaders to get to know each other better and discuss any program issues.
- We now have two Shooting Sports directors so that both the rifle range and shotgun range can operate at the same time. Shooting sports is very popular at SAC and providing more range time makes our Scouts happier.
- The entire food program has been upgraded. Our food services director has not only improved the quality and quantity of food provided for our patrol cooking meals, but also vastly improved the food being served to our staff. A salad bar was just one of the many improvements.
- New Merit Badges have been added. For example, Scouts taking the Archaeology Merit Badge worked on excavating a portion of the old Tarnadge mansion which was demolished in the 1970's. This year, Scouts can take the Aviation Merit Badge, completing their requirements with a float plane ride in Long Lake and a tethered hot air balloon ride in camp!
- The observatory and computerized telescope have refocused our attention on the beautiful Adirondack skies. With no light pollution and elevation we can see millions of stars.
- New day hikes have been added to local peaks.
- For the first time, our special Water Carnival and Paul Bunyan events will both be held each week!

Remaining Issues

Although much work has been done, there are still issues to be addressed. Some of those core issues are:

- The Doll House. Although this camp landmark is beloved by many, it has continued to deteriorate. Previous restoration efforts neglected the roof, and the building is now decrepit. Difficult decisions will need to be made.
- Staff Housing. We are seeking funding to build one or more junior staff bunkhouses to replace the canvas tents currently in use. Retaining and attracting junior staff requires us to improve their living conditions.

The Future of Sabattis

With continuing volunteer efforts, we believe that Sabattis Adventure Camp can remain successful for many years to come. The camp is financially sustainable, infrastructure issues have been remediated, and a core of volunteers continues to donate their time and funds. We plan to continue restoring, upgrading and adding to camp infrastructure.

Although running a wilderness camp 5 hours north can provide challenges, we believe the benefits are immeasurable. SAC provides our Scouts with an opportunity to camp in truly beautiful surroundings, without light or sound pollution, using the Patrol Method that Robert Baden-Powell designed as the foundation of Scouting. There are only a handful of Adirondack Scout camps remaining, and only a few patrol cooking camps in the country. Patriots' Path Council is fortunate to have a beautiful camp that has both of these.