

The Doors are Always Open: A Short History of the Texas Lions Camp

In 1846, a young shingle-maker named Joshua Brown from Gonzales made his way up the Guadalupe River. Brown bought a tract of land and settled in the area which would later be known as Kerrville, setting up a shingle-making camp. Later, limestone was quarried from this land to help build the first courthouse in Kerrville. Shortly after World War I, part of Brown's tract was used as the site for the veteran's hospital.

Many years later, 504 acres of the same land, rich in history, became the Texas Lions Camp. After a polio epidemic swept across the country, leaving thousands of Texas children disabled, the Lions of Texas decided there was something that they could do to help. Responding to the very special needs of these children, the Lions of Texas formed the Texas Lions Camp to serve children with physical disabilities.

In the beginning:

The idea for the Camp originated with Jack Roe and the Kerrville Lions Club. District 2-A Governor Jack Wiech encouraged the incoming eight district governors for 1948-49 to think of the camp as a statewide project and to promote it in their districts. These district governors later became the original incorporators and charter members of the Texas Lions League for Children, Inc., the organization which operated the Texas Lions Camp at that time.

In September 1948, at the first director's meeting, three Lion district governors held a planning meeting to address questions such as: "How can we unite the Lions of Texas to support a project that is not located in their district? How will we find 100 children per session to attend the camp? Will parents let their children stay away from home so that they can attend camp?"

Despite opposition, these dreamers pursued their goal with optimism. In the spring of 1949, the Texas Lions Camp was born at a Council of Governor's meeting in Brownsville, Texas. With only six of the eight Texas governors in attendance, all six signatures were needed on the charter to have a two-thirds majority vote. The dream finally became a reality

when all six men signed: W.R. Rutherford of Dumas, Schley Riley of Big Spring, Jack Wiech of Brownsville, Pat Jackson of Nacogdoches, Reagan Smith of Conroe, and Virgil Minear of Hallettsville. The Camp's Charter was filed in the Office of the Secretary of State and approved as a tax exempt corporation on April 4, 1949. At the Lions International Convention held in New York that July, the international directors approved the camp project, and granted permission for the League to use the name "Lions" in connection with the Camp.

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In the fall of 1950, the land had been secured, but a provision in the deed stated that \$100,000 earmarked for the construction of facilities on the site must be raised within six months. In August 1950, the League's treasury showed a balance of \$76,631.57. The League directors decided a face to face campaign at individual clubs might sell more Lions on the idea of the Camp.

The first club to hear the story was the Downtown Dallas Lions Club in the "birth city of Texas Lionism." Jack Wiech, now president of the League, described the proposed camp in detail at this meeting on October 14, 1950. He pointed out, "that a child is handicapped through no fault of his own, and every child has the right to a happy childhood." He told them that hundreds of youngsters with disabilities would benefit from such a camp.

Even with success in Dallas, the deadline for the needed \$100,000 neared and the campaign was more than \$20,000 short of the goal. The camp's future looked grim when, at the last minute, District Governor Sealie McCreless came to the rescue and "loaned" the League the required \$20,000. The check from McCreless was never cashed and is still on display at the Texas Lions Camp today.

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~ Jack Wiech

The deed to the 504 acre tract was delivered and the formal ground-breaking ceremony took place on September 28, 1950. On the same day, the construction of the first two bunkhouses began. The year 1951 was devoted to building bunkhouses and planning camp operations. By the fall of 1952, the League had finished the kitchen.

The children are here!

As the opening date of camp neared, there were many last minute problems to solve. Both the program director and the purchasing agent resigned within a week of the opening of camp. However, the staff was reorganized and the camp opened on schedule. Sunday, June 8, 1953, after four years of hard work, the Texas Lions Camp opened its doors to 40 excited children. Since then, the doors have never closed.

At the end of the second session on Friday, July 3, 1953, the Texas Lions Camp was formally dedicated "to the perpetual use and enjoyment of handicapped children in Texas." By the end of the summer, 236 children had enjoyed a special summer camping experience. Encouraged by a successful summer, the Lions of Texas continued building.

Every year, the camp encountered new challenges—and rewards. The Texas Lions Camp has grown steadily in the scope of service and number of children it serves, even as the population of Texas has grown.

In 1957, the Texas Commission for the Blind and the Texas Lions League joined together to assist blind adults in adjusting to their disability and developing

skills necessary for maximum independence. This Adult Blind Program was based at the League's facilities and operated from September through May. In 1984 it was moved to the Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center in Austin. In 27 years, more than 1,600 individuals with visual impairments benefited from this program.

In addition, in 1971, a camp for children with Type I diabetes (insulin-dependent) was added to the programs offered by the Texas Lions League. The camp for children with diabetes is a medical education program that focuses on teaching children to care for their special medical needs. At the end of each camp session of children with Type 1 diabetes, parents attend an educational seminar so they can assist and encourage their child upon returning home.

The camp today:

Today, over 1,500 children attend the Texas Lions Camp each summer. Through the years, more than 79,000 children with physical disabilities and Type 1 diabetes have discovered the delights of camp. They have experienced the exhilaration of learning to swim and have developed the desire to improve themselves. Most importantly, they were afforded the opportunity to forget about their disabilities during the magic of camp.

As the Camp celebrates over 70 years of service to special children, the board of directors is again planning for the future of the Camp and the children it serves. A master plan has been developed to update and improve facilities. Through the foresight of caring Lions, the Texas Lions Camp has secured its vital and unique role of service to special children into the 21st Century.

"Texas Lions Camp is the greatest place in the world. I wouldn't trade it for anything."

~ Matt Ward, camper

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