

The Kinetic Campfire: Teaching Camp Songs

Pine trees. Campfires. Cabins. And... singing?

If we were lucky enough to go to summer camp, most of us probably remember singing camp songs. Maybe we can even sing some of our favorites years later, but unless we really search our memories, we might not even remember having actually learned them at all.

Meet Mary, a camp counselor who worked at Tomahawk Ranch, a Girl Scout summer camp in Bailey, CO. She has been going to summer camps since she was six years old. According to Mary, singing is the most essential part of the summer camp experience. “My favorite memories of camp was always the singing”, Mary says. “We mostly use [songs]... to keep the kids from getting bored while waiting.” The Girl Scout camp songs she learned as a counselor-in-training differ slightly from those that she learned growing up, in both style, lyrics, and melody.

Most Girl Scout songs are taught through one group singing one line of lyrics followed by the second group repeating it back. The whole song is sung this way. After one run through, the lyrics are no longer repeated and from then on it is usually sung without repeats. Some songs are kept as repeat songs, establishing a rhythm. Other songs are not taught as repeat songs. Rather, they are taught as “catch-on” songs, where the song is already so repetitive that it is easy to join in after a few verses.

While learning these songs as a camper and as a counselor, Mary said that she was able to pick them up even after the first time singing them. Most of that quick learning came from the hand motions associated with each line of the song. “I’m a visual learner,” she says, “so being able to see the hand motions as I was singing the lyrics helped me pick up on the songs and

remember them.” The hand motion also helps kinetic learners who find it easier to remember the songs if they are able to move with the lyrics. Teaching these songs through a mix of repetition and motion makes learning easier for campers of all learning styles and abilities.

For Mary, however, learning camp songs as a counselor provided a whole new meaning to many of the song lyrics. “When you’re a kid, you don’t realize how dark these songs can get.” She points out that most of the camp songs that have become her favorites involve death, violence, and loss. A song about a buffalo finding his dead brother, a song about a woman being murdered by her fiancé, and a song about a woman being forced to marry and killing herself to escape are all songs that have made it into the Girl Scout song book. There are also a fair share of fun, nonsensical songs and slow, nature songs.

Though the context of the songs may be strange, there is no denying that the songs we sing while waiting for camp activities are stamped forever into our memories through repetition and motion.