CADDY CAMP

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ILLUSTRATION BY DEAN MACADAM

IN ITS HEYDAY, THE POLAND SPRING HOUSE WAS MORE THAN A RESORT. IT WAS A RIGOROUS AND HIGHLY COMPETITIVE BOOT CAMP, WHERE BOYS TRAINED TO BE CADDIES — AND MEN.

WHILE TRAINING WITH THE MARINES AT CAMP Pendleton in California in 1966, my friend Paul Stetson was struck in the head by a utility pole that had come loose from the truck transporting it. He was in a coma for 10 days. "Where did you go to boot camp?" the doctors asked him when he came to.

Stetson answered, "Poland Spring."

Poland Spring Caddy Camp, where I met Paul, trained caddies at the magnificent Poland Spring House resort for 44 years. Run like a military barracks, it defined itself in opposition to the summer camps that dot Maine's lakes and ponds. Whenever a caddy complained about some aspect of camp life, he was quickly reminded by a staff member or

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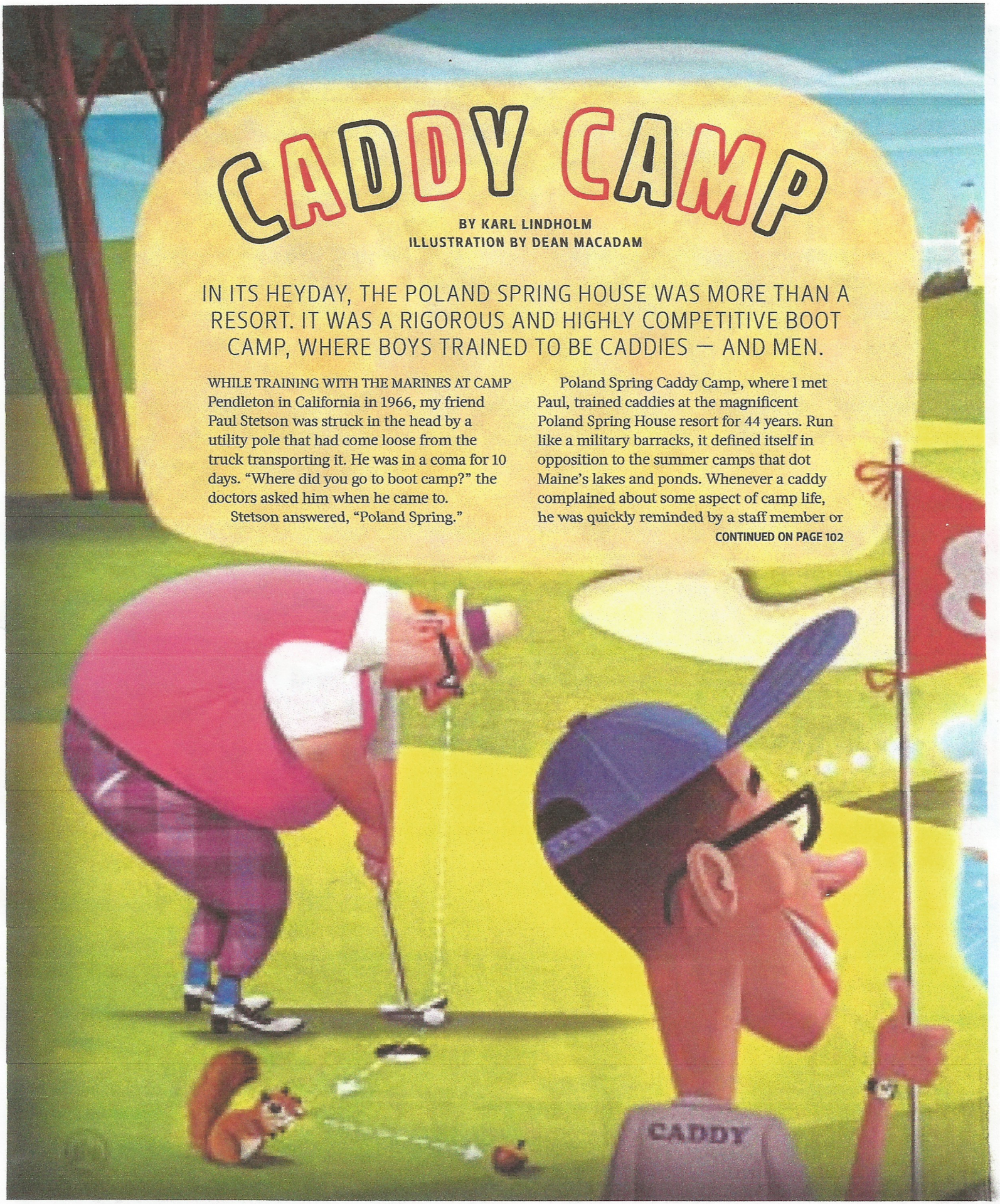

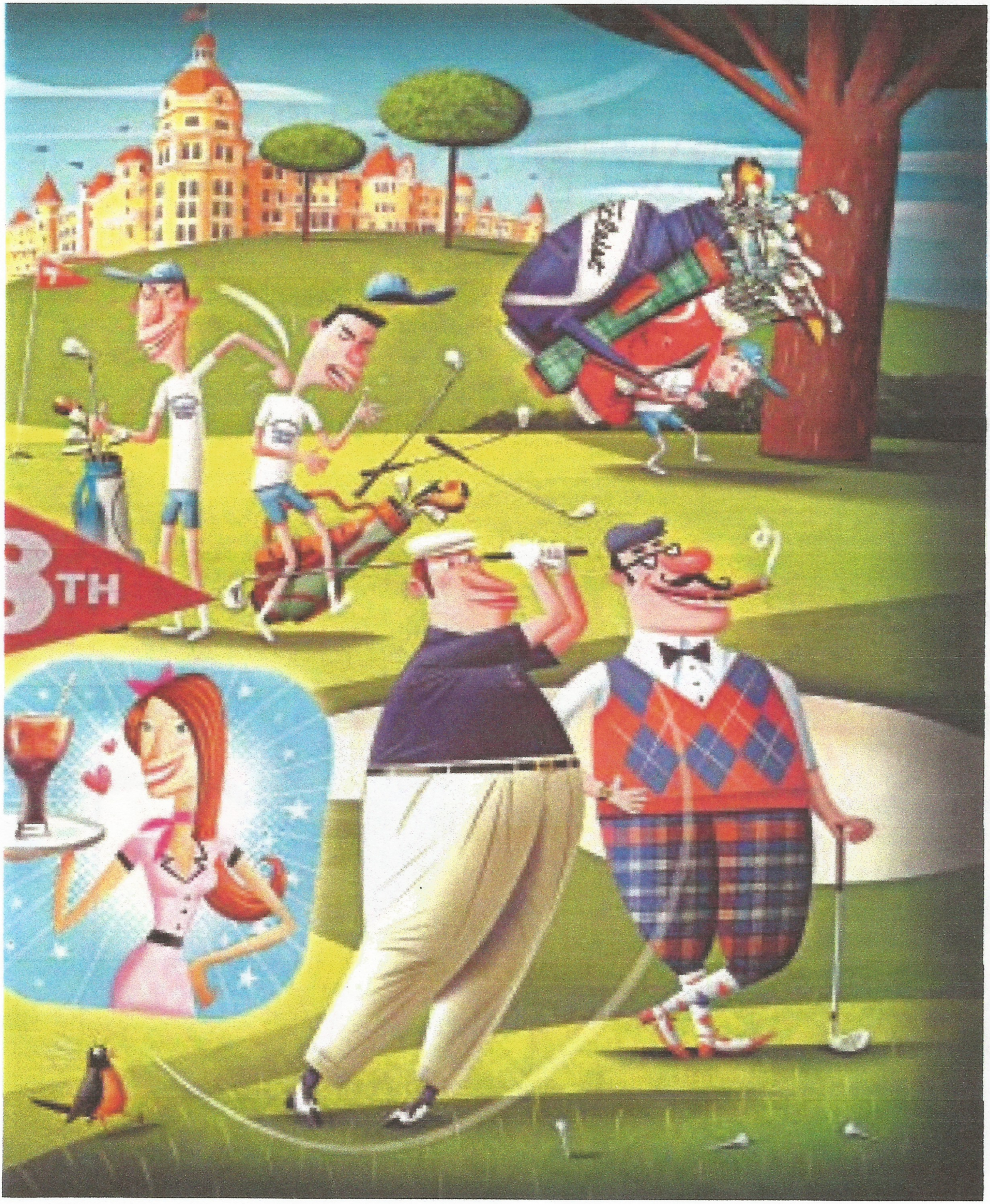
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another caddy, "This ain't a fun camp."

Cute name, Caddy Camp. It was not a cute place.

Caddy Camp began in 1921 as a summer outdoor work experience for poor or troubled boys from the South End Settlement House in Boston. "Some of the roughest and toughest kids have been taken out of undesirable surroundings and brought back perfect gentlemen, well-conditioned and well-trained for any responsibilities," a Boston newspaper declared in 1942.

By the time I got there in 1958, Caddy Camp had lost its exclusive relationship with the Settlement House, but it was still a rugged place. The camp itself was a converted three-story stable, home for the summer to 50–75 boys, mostly from Boston and Maine. Even these many years later, I find my thoughts often return nostalgically to the eight summers I spent there, from 1958 to 1965, when the hotel closed. Ten years later, on the Fourth of July, the hotel burned down in a spectacular fire of mysterious origin. The camp, a warehouse in its last stage, burned down 10 years after that.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Poland Spring House was considered one of the grandest hotels in the country, counting among its guests U.S. presidents (Grant, McKinley, Cleveland, Teddy Roosevelt, Harding, Taft, JFK as a child) and other notables (John Barrymore, Alexander Graham Bell, John D. Rockefeller, Babe Ruth). Built in 1876 by Hiram Ricker, whose spring waters had been attracting visitors for decades, the grand hotel had towers and gables and windows galore, rooms for 450 guests, and separate quarters for servants and a hotel staff that came to number 300. Its enormous dining room, 150 feet long and 9,000 feet square, offered a menu of local turkey, lamb, and beef, and vegetables from the gardens of the nearby Shakers. Guests sitting on the wicker furniture on the porch enjoyed a stunning view west across rolling hillsides of forests and lakes all the way to Mount Washington.

The golf course, one of the first in Maine, was built in 1898 and was immediately pronounced "the best hotel links in New England." Caddy Camp was a service to hotel guests: every golfer was required to take a caddy.

I hated Caddy Camp: it was so *hard*. I was just a kid, 13, and the golf bags that we lugged were so heavy.

In 1958, my first summer, the Poland Spring House was in serious decline, but it was still an elegant place. Fifty-two boys paid $25 to attend Caddy Camp and $12 a week for room and board. I hated it: it was *so hard*. I was just a kid, 13, and the golf bags that we lugged were terribly heavy. At the height of the season, we carried "doubles," two bags, which the bigger, older boys relished because they got paid double. I didn't care about the money; for me, it meant twice as much work. Walking the 4 or 5 miles of the 18-hole course without a golf bag on my shoulder would have been difficult enough. I just wanted to survive that first summer, and I wasn't sure I could.

The first couple of days at camp were a crash course in expectations and obligations. The camp directors and senior counselors, along with some experienced caddies, taught us how to caddy. We were not mere "bag toters" like boys at other courses. A premium was placed on hustle. We had to be 10 to 20 yards ahead of our golfers at all times.

We were shown how to carry the bag so our backs, hips, and butts, not our shoulders, would absorb the weight. We learned how to run noiselessly with the bag, with a hand gripped tightly over the club heads. We learned that you don't replace divots any old way. I still groan when I see a divot go unreplaced, or a shadow across a putting line (or worse, a footprint!), or an unraked sand trap. A golfer who doesn't replace his divot cannot be trusted. He is a careless person.

We learned how to work the green, attending the flag, keeping our shadows out of putting lines. We learned where to forecaddie on each hole and to mark balls in trouble and communicate by signals to golfers and caddies on the tee. To watch four caddies carrying singles work a foursome of golfers was a beautifully coordinated exercise. These gestures were important and showed a respect for the game itself and its green and pristine landscape. We worked hard for our two-and-a-half bucks. We were different. We were better. We were trained. We hustled. We were the best caddies in America.

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Caddies ate their meals with the other employees in "the Zoo," a cafeteria at the back of the hotel. The food was awful, everyone concurred. The only consolation of eating in the Zoo was the fact that the waitresses, college girls who signed on for the summer, ate there, too.

We were boys out of control, having just crossed the portal of adolescence. Here were the objects of our desire, pretty girls in their gold or light-green waitress uniforms who recognized our desperation and were amused by it. We learned their names, and we talked about them endlessly, fantasizing impossible relationships.

I was the luckiest Caddy Camper who ever lived: I got to live out my most powerful adolescent fantasies. During my last three summers, I

competition for team points. Every gesture thus had meaning and consequence. The winning team members at the end of the summer received rings with "PSCC" on a crest at an awards banquet. It was a trinket to be greatly treasured.

Each afternoon, one of the counselors wrote on a large blackboard that evening's competition. Now and then, the announcement was accompanied by a notification that read "NPOCU," pronounced by all as "Na-POE-Coo." It stood for "No Part Of Caddy Uniform." We received only four t-shirts and four pairs of shorts for the whole summer, and we were expected to be in a clean uniform every morning at inspection or there would be the devil to pay (we would be sent to the basement to clean a shirt by hand, which we would then have to wear wet until it dried). We couldn't afford to be ripping our uniforms in King of the Hill or Bombardment. NPOCU!

Everything, absolutely everything, from cleaning the camp to caddying to evening athletics, was a competition for team points.

One competition, To Hell and Back, was basketball without rules, a high-scoring, brutal affair whose name came from a famous WWII movie depicting the heroic combat experience of Audie Murphy, the war's most decorated soldier. When I asked Bob who thought up the game, he smiled and said, "That sounds like Chick." Teams earned five points for a hoop, three points for hitting the rim, and one point for hitting the backboard. The basketball court had an asphalt surface, and the intensity of the contest was evidenced by the bloody legs of the caddies in their shorts the next day.

Another competition, cane fighting, was a simple concept. Two

boys paired off, each holding onto a broomstick from which the broom had been cut. The object was for one to get the other to let go by whatever means necessary. Hand-to-hand combat. There were some titanic fights, full of acrobatic twisting and turning, falling and flipping.

On the morning of the day of the boxing competition, boxing gloves were simply hung over the top of

General Eisenhower famously said, "The true mission of sports is to prepare young men for war." We believed it.

the blackboard. Caddies walked around for the rest of the day with knots in their stomachs. We fought two 1-minute rounds in 16-ounce gloves. As pillow-y as the gloves were, it still hurt when a punch landed flush. There were many bloody noses. The emphasis was on aggression and courage. If you danced, you lost; the Marquess of Queensbury was not welcome here. It was two kids whaling on each other. When two of the older, larger boys squared off, the noise was deafening.

Capture the Flag took place on the hill next to the eighth fairway. The team attacking the hill was required to make a "Banzai" scream as it ascended. We were young warriors.

The undercurrent at Caddy Camp, unstated but evident, was that each generation would have its war, men would fight it, and this was our training ground. But our war in Southeast Asia would prove to be different from Bob and Chick's. Few of us raced to enlist. My close friend from Caddy Camp, Richard Buzzell, died in Vietnam in a helicopter crash. Al Schofield, a caddy and counselor with me, was also killed in Vietnam, just four years after his last summer at Caddy Camp. He was 21.

For Marine Bob Spear, the memory of a beautiful summer day on the golf course, carrying doubles for two good golfers, provided relief on hot and scary nights in the field in Vietnam. Wayne Chasson, named Best Camper in 1964, flew helicopters in Vietnam, and, 35 years later, in Iraq as well.

The caddy, the teenage boy trying to make a few bucks before his 18th birthday, was a disappearing breed by 1965, my last year at Caddy Camp, the last year of the hotel.

These days, caddies are mostly men, often good golfers themselves. They make 50 to 100 bucks a round. In 1958, my first year, we made $2.50 a round, and hoped for a 50-cent tip.

I don't know if Caddy Camp was a bizarre and inhumane place, a sort of *Lord of the Flies*-meets-*Caddyshack*, or merely the setting for a lot of robust, adolescent fun. Probably both. I do know it reflected the values of its era. It was a frank dedication to the notions of masculinity of the time. Everybody, even the strongest and most competent of caddies, was subjected to pranks, hazing, kidding, and abuse. We would learn to "take it," develop thick skin, toughen up, so that future disappointment or hardship would be easier to handle or avoid.

My own kids – I have four – know Caddy Camp as a mythical place of great hardship and glory, a place I would conjure whenever I scolded them for lassitude or laziness.

They would roll their eyes and say, "I know, Dad, when you were our age, you carried two enormous golf bags around an 18-hole golf course on a scorching hot summer day – not once but twice!" And they would counter my threats by saying, "What are you going to do, Dad, send me to Caddy Camp?"

My response: "I'd like to."

Karl Lindholm recently retired as professor of American Studies at Middlebury College in Vermont. He is working on a book about his experiences at Poland Spring Hotel.