

# The Big Backyard



Exploring a Treasured Landscape through Young Eyes

by Sherri Miles

NEARLY 100 YEARS AGO, THE 2,100-ACRE CRANE ESTATE in Ipswich was a playground, the summer retreat of Richard T. Crane, Jr., his wife Florence, and their two children, Cornelius and Florence. This summer, the normally serene estate became a playground once again, echoing with the sound of children laughing along stone paths and dirt trails, squealing in delight in the Vegetable and Italian Gardens, and singing loud and long as they hiked around the property.

It was all the result of SummerQuest, a new day camp introduced by The Trustees and the Ipswich YMCA. It's not your typical camp. At SummerQuest, the 9- to 12-year-old campers don't play ping pong, horseshoes, or kickball. Instead, they learn to look for edible plants and roots, make white pine tea, and build a shelter. While they are learning these new skills, swimming and kayaking in the ocean, and playing their way around the grounds, they get to know the estate and are challenged to design a Quest, or treasure hunt, for future visitors.

*"We begin our quest at the barn door. / Take a right and walk the paved floor. / Turn left at the lamppost and up the stairs. / Left again and look for some pears."*

Questing is a model of place-based education that deepens outdoor and cultural learning by getting people engaged in their

local places. "The goal was not to be another environmental science camp," says Sarah Bursky, The Trustees' SummerQuest program director, "but to really think about how to connect kids specifically to local places."

Each week of SummerQuest was built around a theme – whether dunes or shipwrecks, marine life or history. For the first part of the week, the kids ranged over the estate, learning about its natural and cultural history. Their explorations of flora and fauna, gardens and the Grand Allée all led up to the creation of their own Quest. They chose the special places on the estate that they wanted to share with visitors, drawing a map and weaving in rhyming clues to get from beginning to end.

"The real learning happens before the campers actually create the Quest," says Bursky. "They have to learn and care enough about the estate to decide what places they want to have in the Quest, what they want to say and share. It builds a sense of having done something for a place."

At week's end, the campers played host to their parents and celebrated their accomplishment. They became the guides, boasting about their insider's knowledge of the estate, and leading their parents on the Quest that the kids spent the week creating.

*"Turn to the left, walk beside the stone wall. / Run your fingers along rocks, large and small."*



## SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN

The Trustees had some experience with day camps, but they knew that the Crane Estate had something unique to offer – and that they wanted to create a camp that would reach a broad audience across the North Shore. The Ipswich-based New England Biolabs and the Crane Company (founded by Richard T. Crane, Sr., and today based in Connecticut) agreed, and both offered generous donations to help get the program off the ground. The Trustees then partnered with the Ipswich Family YMCA, which provided additional staff and helped find the right mix of campers to fill the camp.

“I’ve always viewed the Crane Estate as a place for house tours, pleasant walks, and weddings,” says Chris Thibodeau, YMCA SummerQuest camp director. “But there was more to offer here. Questing is unique to camps in this area, and the opportunity to learn about this estate as well as ecology and the environment is a fantastic mix.”

A key goal for both The Trustees and the YMCA was to reach out to local communities with a scholarship program. They wanted to give children who wouldn’t otherwise have been able to go to camp the opportunity to experience the out-of-doors in a whole new way. Of the 150 children who attended SummerQuest in its first year, more than 40 percent received full-tuition scholarships.

“It gave these kids a bit of freedom to be beyond the brick, cement, and pavement, which is what the majority of them see,” says Thibodeau. The Trustees and YMCA also reached out to the Pathways for Children youth program in Gloucester and has similar plans in development with Beverly Bootstraps for next year.

*“At the end of the wall, you will ‘Find Your Place.’ / Choose your next steps the grassy uphill path to trace.”*

Thibodeau noticed changes in all of the children each week, and the lessons the campers took home with them went beyond the Crane Estate itself. “The kids see this open space, and we tell them, ‘This is your playground for the week – explore it, ask questions, poke around, dig, and run,’” she says. “But, that’s all with the guidelines that we don’t pull branches off trees, we don’t rip up plants, we don’t chase the birds. And we explain why – because they’re endangered, it disturbs them, it can create an injury.”

Parents saw changes, too. The camp taught very mindful, yet simple and important concepts, reflects Tara Quarles, mother of camper Henry Quarles, “about the history of the Crane Estate, the focus on nature, and the importance of maintaining and respecting that specific property as well as our outside surroundings and wildlife.”



By the end of each week, says The Trustees’ Bursky, the campers had begun to understand what it means to be a steward. “We explain to the kids that stewards help take care of something they care about,” she says. “The fact they helped us create Quests that other people can do when they come to this property – that means that they have all become stewards of this place. But they can be stewards in other places, too, any time they conserve water or throw away a piece of litter instead of leaving it on the ground.”

At week’s end, in front of a smiling audience of parents, the campers performed silent skits capturing best-of-camp moments and received individual awards amid rounds of applause. Then, with a little hand-tugging and a lot of pride, they set out on their Quest once more, this time with their parents in tow to decipher the rhymes and clues of their Quest and find its treasure box at the end.

*“On top of the hill, you will see the coast. / A view of which the Cranes could boast. / Head to the hilltop’s edge. / Go to the left, and look under a hedge. / Hope you find what you’re looking for. / that’s the end of our quest; there is no more.”*

*Sherri Miles is a writer, editor, and journalism instructor with a background in environmental education. She lives in Cambridge, MA.*