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The Lure of Lark Camp ... I'm Singing Its Praises

Leave it to your dearest friends and extraordinary musicians to ferret out the most amazing musical experience of a lifetime. This summer Gareth and Lisa Loy did just that when they suggested we meet them at Lark in the Morning Camp in the Mendocino Woodlands State Park in northern California for a week of musical exploration. This would be their fifth such visit.

To find out more about the camp, Gareth directed me to the Lark Camp web site at www.larkcamp.com where I learned that the campground was built in the 1930s (like Camp David and 44 others built by the Civilian Conservation Corps) and nestled in 700 acres of redwood trees along the Big River just inland from the quaint coastal town of Mendocino. What's more, we'd have the opportunity to select from over 200 classes — tempting choices of high-level instruction from masters of musical traditions from around the world!

Prior to leaving, my first pleasure would be to consider which classes I'd most like to take. Mind you, I'd never had the opportunity to sample the kind of flexible scheduling Lark Camp would offer. Participants need not sign up for the courses, just show

up, and they can attend any course they want on any particular day or forego classes altogether and simply join in with other campers for impromptu jam sessions in the woods, in the cabins, on the stages, or in the dance halls into the evening! In other words, every day I could attend different hourly classes (and they were staggered to start on the hour at one site and on the half hour at the other site) from 9am until 6pm. I knew the drawback to switching classes from day to day would be the lack of

depth by only getting an hour's introduction to a subject compared to as much as six hours' worth by sticking with one instructor/class.

So for my first Lark Camp experience, I decided to balance singing, dancing, instrument playing, and songwriting — a decision prompted as much by stamina as well as anything else! So, the weeklong courses I attended included Irish and also French-Canadian ballad singing, hardshoe Irish dancing and Greek dancing, playing the bodhran, and





ballad writing class. As it turned out, I also popped in for brief introductions to swing singing, the Chinese flute, and tango. But the learning feast didn't end with the classes, it broadened to include spontaneous happenings of music in clusters here, there, and everywhere all day long. Pickup sessions materialized, with every combination of instruments, as singers and musicians gathered at will. The evenings ended with choices of planned musical events at various designated sites — e.g. Irish fiddle sessions, Greek music, harp performances, dances, etc.

We shared this magnificent, rustic campground with 750 others without incident or accident. With regularly scheduled buses to get us to the three main eating/studying areas in minutes, we had convenient access to the facilities and did not need cars all week long. The spacious grounds provided campers lovely settings to stay clustered together for camaraderie but sufficiently isolated for privacy. (As good fortune would have it, Joe and I found an idyllic spot beside the river, shown above.)

And one might guess that with such huge numbers, the food fare would have to be basic and prepared in vats. Au contraire! The huge selection of choices

(morning, noon, and night) accommodated even the pickiest eater, with several selections for vegetarians even. Gareth and Lisa did leave camp one night for their anniversary dinner, paying top dollar for the best meal at the most elegant restaurant in the area, yet by their accounts this dinner out didn't measure up to the gourmet meals they ate every other night at camp. I've certainly never eaten better in a one-week period.

Early morning and late afternoon pleasures included walking along the meandering river, investigating the fitness path designed for youth groups, hiking up the trails, and exploring the beauty of this redwood paradise — sometimes with camera in hand, sometimes without. Where else can you go for a leisurely stroll in the woods and discover clusters of incredibly

talented musicians playing tunes from around the world ... each oblivious to the others because the immense redwoods and deep mulch absorb the sounds made only a few feet away? I couldn't believe my eyes the first time I spotted a gal playing lyrical melodies on her full-size harp under a giant redwood — an instrument of such magnificence and beauty producing sounds so mellifluous — how lucky I felt to catch her inspired, impromptu concert. I wouldn't have thought folks would bring such imposing instruments to camp, but they brought what they loved to play and shared with all.

Though many campers sported the 25th year anniversary T-shirts and could relate stories from all 25 years, there seemed to be ample warmth and joy to spread around to the newcomers. And despite the inconvenience of trekking a ways to the showers, campers brought elegance to primitive facilities. Some campers had decorative rugs out in front of their tents, others hung lovely banners and ornaments from trees and cabins, and still others had tables laden with food and flowers in vases to invite guests to join them. One such table



led us to meet Robert McNeill Crawford, storyteller for the local Mendocino area radio show and devoted cellist. You'll read more about this new Macneil Clan member on p. 48 (Balladry).

Speaking of the children's favorite storyteller at camp, I should also comment on the activities provided for the kids at Lark Camp. Besides courses in music, there were classes in art, nature, and drama. What's more, there were several courses for the whole family or for parents and kids together. Furthermore, I was quite impressed by the maturity shown by the young kids at this camp — and their musical talent, as well. I learned early that the big finale of the week was the children's drama, scheduled for the final night of camp. With costumes, sets, and props, the kids entertained the adult campers with their impressive and clever show. This event was followed by the talent show put on by the grownups.

Gareth and Lisa Loy acted in and directed the production of "Ladle Rat Rotten Hut," the Anguish Languish version of "Little Red Riding Hood" by H. L. Chase for this year's show. Joe pitched in to provide guitar accompaniment and I sang with the quartet rendition of "Hey, Little Red Riding Hood" popularized in the 60s. To our delight, the

audience joined right along with us. But the stars of the show had to be the comedic genius and San Francisco lawyer who played the part of the wolf and the handsome *bearded* orator who tickled everyone as Red Riding Hood's grandmother.

Gareth, Joe and I sang 40 years earlier in college, when Gareth used his middle name, Dave. For this show, our Dave Loy Trio sang two songs Joe wrote (and to which Gareth and I wrote the harmonies). The talent show emcee had a very long hook that he used with a couple of acts —thankfully, not us. Once again, we relished singing together for an appreciative crowd.

At right you'll see the *2005 list of Lark Camp courses that relate to the British Isles and Celtic culture*, should you be interested in those specifically. And though the list varies from year to year, each year the list gets longer, so I hear.

The only drawback to sharing my glowing report on Lark Camp is increasing the competition for the finite number of reservations available each year. Nonetheless, I feel obliged to spread the word to the rest of my "family." As for me, I have a few dozen more courses I'd like to take, so I hope I'll get my reservation in early enough to attend. Want to come too?

