

# Burt Shurly Camp

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The Burt Shurly Camp is named after a prominent and remarkable doctor who was also a Detroit Board of Education member and president. However, he never owned the land and didn't finance its purchase.

A Washtenaw County map published in 1874 by Everts and Stewart shows Parmenus Watts as owning what is now the camp property. A similar map published in 1915 by Geo. Ogle and Co. shows Richard Webb as owner of the camp property. Multiple visits by Dick and Mary Lou Frenndt to the Washtenaw County Register of Deeds office in Ann Arbor and many hours of research revealed the following information.

The earliest record of the camp property we found, was a sale of about 100 acres of land by William Watts to Parmenus Watts in 1863 for the sum of \$1500. In the 1874 map noted above, Parmenus Watts owned this and other land that now comprise all of the camp. He lost the camp property in a Sheriff Sale to Richard Webb in 1888. Watts owed the Chelsea Savings Bank \$1,207.89 and the property was sold at auction, to Webb, for a sum of \$603 as the high bid.

Richard Webb died in 1987 and Probate Court records of his will show he left the camp property to eight heirs in a transaction recorded in the Register of Deeds Office in 1902. The heirs are listed a Janette Webb, Anna Stevenson, George M. Webb, Walter J. Webb, Richard W. Webb, Margarette L. Hyde, Jane M. Glenn, Elizabeth A. Benton, Lucy A. Sweeney, and Janette G. Pratt. The first name listed in the heirs, Janette Webb, was Richard's second wife and he bequeathed her \$150 and 'life estate' on the Webb farm, which gave her the right to live out the remainder of her life on the farm. One daughter, Anna Stevenson, was given \$100 cash, but no share in the property, and the remaining sons and daughters each received a one-eighth share in the property upon the death of the second wife. Richard also requested to be buried next to his first wife in the North Lake Church cemetery. A large tombstone marks his gravesite.

It appears from the documents we have been able to examine, that the camp property was likely used by William Webb's second wife Jeanette until her death and that the heirs then leased the property to the Detroit Tuberculosis Sanitarium (DTS) for several years as evidenced below.

A Detroit Free Press article dated July 3, 1931, reported the new camp opened with the first 50 boys having arrived the previous Monday for a one month stay and then 50 girls would stay a month. It also stated that the total cost of operating the camp was paid from Christmas Seal funds including *the cost of leasing the farm house for two years.*

Tuberculosis was a devastating disease in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On February 10, 2015, PBS aired a program titled "*The Forgotten Plague*" that stated: "By the twentieth century, TB had killed one in seven of all the people who ever lived." For many years the disease was commonly called "consumption", perhaps explaining the lack of awareness about TB. Fresh air was considered to be very helpful in recovery and camps were established across the country. In 1943, streptomycin was discovered and,

combined with other drugs, was an effective treatment for TB. Fresh air camps began to close.

In 1935 the property was sold for a sum of one dollar to Detroit Tuberculosis Sanitarium. Each of the original heirs, or their subsequent heirs, signed off on this transaction including Louis and Lillian Stevenson. Louis was the son of Anna Stevenson, the daughter given \$100 but no share in the property.

Anna Stevenson had another son, William Elder Stevenson, and in 1936 a Probate Court in Jackson, Mi, directed his widow and executrix, Alma Stevenson, to sell William Elder Stevenson estate's interest in the camp property to the Detroit Tuberculosis Sanitarium. She did so for the sum of \$800. It seems likely that William Elder Stevenson believed his mother should have shared in the property inheritance and something in his will caused legal action resulting in the \$800 sale by his widow to the Detroit Tuberculosis Sanitarium. The Jackson County Court records section was unable to find the Stevenson estate documents.

A Free Press article dated May 23, 1935, outlined improvements planned for the camp, and the Chelsea Standard June 10, 1937 edition, announced the completion of the new facilities including two new cabins, a large dining room and kitchen with modern equipment, a cottage for the camp director, and new sewer and water systems; all at a cost of about \$40,000. It was reported that in 1936 kids gained an average of four pounds during their one month stay. The camp was used by kids from 10-14 years of age who had a childhood form (mild) of tuberculosis.

The Chelsea Standard reported many other uses of the camp over the years including church groups, women's clubs, and in September 1938, the Wayne State University football team came for 2-3 weeks of training. The Chelsea Rod and Gun Club used the camp often over the years until at least 1958. The Chelsea Standard reported in 1951 that among many other fine features, the North Lake camp had a modern kitchen with an electric dishwasher.

The Detroit Board of Education gained title to the camp on July 11, 1966, from the Detroit and Wayne County Tuberculosis Foundation. The foundation had obtained the camp from its predecessor, the Detroit Tuberculosis Sanitarium, on November 21, 1955. Each of these transactions was simply a transfer of ownership for the nominal price of one dollar. At some point prior to the Detroit Board of Education's purchase, the camp was being used by Detroit underprivileged kids rather than TB patients as evidenced by this excerpt from a Detroit Free Press article on July 1, 1954, "More than 200 *underprivileged* children left Wednesday for a month's vacation at Single Bar Christmas Seal Camp at the Detroit Tuberculosis Sanitarium at North Lake near Chelsea." (Italics added)

Over the years there has been a legend that the camp property was given to the DPS with a condition that it must be used for camp purposes only, but none of the sale agreements included any restrictions of use on the property. In 2015 Megan Prindle of the Legacy Land Conservancy spoke at our Annual Meeting about unsuccessful efforts to secure the development rights of the camp.

In 2016, the Detroit Public School System (DPS) was awarded \$617 million by the State of Michigan which saved the district from bankruptcy. There was concern at that time that the DPS assets (including the Burt Shurly Camp) may be sold. The state funding appeared to end the bankruptcy concern.

In a Crain's Detroit Business article, "New Crisis Looms for Detroit Schools" dated July 1, 2018, it reported that school building maintenance was in an extreme situation. The article reported that during the years leading up to the bailout, limited maintenance was done, and little is still being done.

One of the conditions of the state bailout was that no new debt be taken on, so no bonds can be sold for major school maintenance projects. A recent study found over \$400 million in school building improvements is needed.

If the camp property was ever sold and developed as residential property, current zoning would make it very limited in scope. Since Dexter Township zoning of the camp area is "Recreation Conservation", lakefront parcels must be a minimum of 330 feet wide, and the largest number of lakefront lots would be four, since the camp lake frontage is something less than 1500 feet. The rest of the property could be subdivided without lake access, but lots are required to be a minimum of five acres each. About three quarters of the camp is in Lyndon Township which has the camp area zoned as "Wilderness and Recreation". Permitted uses are (A) public and private forest preserves, (B) public or private conservation areas or game refuges, (C) public parks and playground areas, and (D) single family dwellings with minimum lot size of 80 acres and a minimum lot width of 1320 feet. The maximum number of parcels in the combined townships would be about 10 lots. Of more concern, perhaps, would be turning it into a state or local park with public access issues.

In 2014, the Detroit Public School System's Emergency Manager, Jack Martin, asked the firm of Consulting Resource Associates (CRA) to evaluate the camp's operation and facilities. Problems were identified and a short term plan to operate the camp was successfully implemented.

In 2015, the DPS hired the Detroit Rescue Mission Ministries to operate the camp under a five-year contract. This was part of the recommendation of CRA. In 2017, Dr. Nikolai Vitti was hired as Superintendent of the Detroit School System. He has an impressive record of success at other districts, and has led substantial improvements in his first two years in Detroit, which has 51,000 students. Dr. Vitti asked Ken Myers, President of CRA, to head a fund raising effort of 4.5 million for improvements to the Burt Shurly Camp. Dr. Vitti considers the camp to be a gem that should be maximized. His goal is to have the 5<sup>th</sup> grand curriculum to include time at the camp for every child. This is in addition to the summer camp operation. Many of these students have never been out of their neighborhood and the learning and experience of camp can be a major light in their lives. One administrator told Ken Myers that many of these kids have never seen the night stars. That's an incredible thought.

In February of this year, we met with Ken Myers and an associate at CRA, Mark Schrupp, who is a former Executive Director of the facilities of the Detroit Public School System. They outlined the vision they have for the camp. It is impressive and it is imminent. It

also requires private support to raise the 4.5 million needed. You can help at any level. Ken will be at our annual meeting to present the vision and answer questions.

Last year they received a donation to make some immediate improvements. The beach shower room was renovated, and a climbing wall, two zip lines and two rope courses were installed. One of the two pontoon boats was sold and several canoes purchased with this money. The kids now canoe on Wild Goode Lake (to avoid North Lake powerboat traffic). Another donor funded the new front entrance to the camp (along with some assistance from DTE), and CRA provides their leadership skills at no cost.

Future plans are to make the camp a year-round facility. At present, the buildings are uninsulated with no HVAC systems. The fund raising program mentioned earlier has specific projects in mind including improvements to existing facilities and a new multipurpose building that would include a gym.

Part of the plan to make the camp a viable operation is to open the facility to use by private and public organizations for retreats and other events on a rental basis. These would be primarily in the non-summer months. To do this, the camp must meet certification requirements for this type of facility and be ADA compliant. These are part of the improvement plan.

The camp may have an open house this summer. If so, we will post the date on our website and send an email notice of dates and details. For more information on the camp see our website "[Northlaker.org](http://Northlaker.org)".