

9# Tent Colony Woods

It's quiet now, but can you imagine 300 people living here, under the trees, along the shores of Lake Mendota? The university's Tent Colony was the most unusual kind of open air dormitory, providing low-cost housing to students enrolled in the university's summer sessions.

Over a 50 year period beginning in 1912, students and their families came to these woods each summer to pitch their tents on one of the wooden platforms scattered among the trees.

The so-called "tent colonists" organized themselves much like a city. Each summer they elected a mayor, a constable, a postmaster, several aldermen, and an editor for their camp newsletter, called The Breezes. They even had a sanitary commissioner—someone to make sure that the latrines was being cleaned.

While the students—often male high-school teachers studying for their master's degree—caught the boat shuttle to campus, moms and children remained back at camp. They spent their days swimming, fishing and boating.

Camp was really quite rustic. For many years electricity was only available in the single study hall, so the tents had to be lit with kerosene lamps. Food was placed in ice boxes to keep it from spoiling. But far from being a hardship, families saw life in the Tent Colony as an unforgettable adventure.

The Tent Colony is now nearly gone. The last tent was taken down in 1962. The swimming piers, the tent platforms, the water pumps, even the latrines have all but disappeared. Where hundreds of people once lived, only a few hints remain.

So as you wander through Tent Colony Woods, look for evidence of this vanished way of life. See if you can locate the concrete footings for the tent platforms or the foundation of the latrine.

Can you guess what happened right at this spot? For more clues to these mysteries, check out the Preserve website for old pictures, newsletters and maps of this ghost-town-by-the-lake.

Thanks for listening. Look for signposts throughout the Preserve for more audio tour spots or download the entire story series from our website. Happy trails!