

This is the story of the personal journey of teenagers 50 years ago and of the unique summer camp that moved them. It is how a group of teenagers came of age, not sexually, but rather as persons in an unconventional and unpredictable environment.

1. Introduction to "Cibola"

"Cibola" is the name of a summer camp in the mid-20th century, from 1954 to 1964, that was most unusual. Some 50 or 60 high and junior high students of both genders traveled along with counselors and staff from large cities of the northeast and north central US to a ranch in the Rockies in northern New Mexico, where activities were based. Travel was by used school buses and other vehicles of questionable wear and origin, and nights on the road were spent in sleeping bags under the stars and sometimes worse at parks along the way. The camp was operated by a youngish married couple of educators who were adventurous, innovative, and iconoclastic. The Cibola season was eight weeks long, one week each for crossing the US, and six based at the actual ranch.

I was one of these teens. Some of us went to Cibola for a single summer; many were repeaters, a few for three or more summers. Every kid emerged changed by Cibola. Most of us gained indelible memories of certain experiences and adventures, and many emerged with profound changes in their world views and social attitudes. The tight cohesion of the Cibola community helped us shed parts of our urban defenses and become more sensitive to others. All of us were players in a unique American experience never to repeat.

2. Setting

A. The Times

In order to appreciate the unusual nature of Cibola it is necessary to understand America in the decade and a half or so following World War II. The first two-thirds of the camp's existence was during the McCarthy witch hunts and the Eisenhower years. The Vietnam experience was just getting notice toward the last Cibola summers.

Television was black and white, with major programs typified by Ed Sullivan, I Love Lucy, and by Ozzie and Harriet. Alcohol and tobacco were the only drugs in everyday life. Divorce was relatively rare. Airline travel was uncommon, telephones were land lines with black handsets, and the internet had not been conceived. Cell phones were only found in "Dick Tracy" comics.

The flower generation/hippies/Summer of Love/Woodstock were yet to come. Artistically, for the campers the primary music was a choice between early rock and roll, as in Elvis, Bill Haley and the Comets, Chuck Berry, and between folk music of the coffee shop variety, as with Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and "authentic" acoustic songs like those from Appalachia.

B. Ranch

The ranch, of some 160 acres, was located in the small farming valley of San Cristobal, about 17 miles north of Taos, New Mexico, itself some 70 miles north of Santa Fe, the nearest major city. The altitude at the ranch was around 8000 feet, and necessitated a few days' acclimatization. The creek running through the San Cristobal valley is the source of good water descending from the Sangre De Cristo mountains above, part of the southern Rockies. Facing away from the mountain peaks toward the west,

one is confronted by a sweeping vista of high desert to the horizon, with the gorge of the Rio Grande river cutting like a gash in the desert foreground below. The aroma was of pinon pine and sage, a characteristic of New Mexico highlands.

The ranch had been used in prior decades variously as a boarding school and a summer camp, and also as a center for leftists before WWII. There was a large central two story building shaped as a hollow rectangle with many rooms surrounding a center “patio” with an enormous pine tree in the middle. This building had a large kitchen and dining room, a recreation room above, and a comfortable library. There were a laundry, shower/bathrooms for boys and girls, a ping pong room, and a darkroom, as well as several bedrooms for staff. A number of cabins were distributed in the surrounding woods, divided roughly into 3 girls’ and 4 boys’ cabins. The barn had been converted into a theatre. There also were stables for horseback riding and pack trips overnight, a crude baseball field, volleyball, and other facilities.

3. Personnel

People at Cibola can be divided into three groups, the Orrs who owned and operated the camp, the staff members, and us “kids”, the term we used in place of “teens”.

Eleanor and Alexander Orr were educators in their early 30s who taught during the school year at private secondary schools in Washington, DC. They started their own private high school, The Hawthorne School, in 1956; in some respects it was as unusual as the Cibola camp, but that is another (and longer) story. Eleanor, who preferred to be called “Eorr” after the Winnie The Pooh character, generally was running the show on a daily and even minute-by-minute basis. It is impossible adequately to describe Eorr, so unconventional was she. Eorr was very persuasive, a characteristic she used in many a “tight” spot. She always had some activity going which was exciting, original, and usually involving group improvisation. If nothing was happening, she invented something on what ever context (or pretext) was at hand, temporally, geographically, or socially. By contrast, Sandy Orr was the background partner, more involved with planning, logistics, and infrastructure, complementing Eorr and sometimes keeping her adventurous excursions closer to earth.

The staff members comprised counselors, one assigned to each cabin according to gender, the cook, a nurse, and sometimes associated spouses and children. Most of the counselors were educators; often they were artists in dance, theatre, and music. The staff, plus Sandy and Eorr, drove the vehicles.

We “kids” generally came from upper middle class educated and professional families from D.C., Boston, New York City suburbs, Cleveland, and Chicago. We were more or less good students, articulate, and clean and well-dressed, at least at the start of the summer. A few of the kids and counselors were musicians, both classical and folk, and we kids were always ready to sit around a campfire singing to guitars, a banjo, recorders; besides folk songs, the girls especially were conversant with show tunes, a fact made evident when crossing Oklahoma. The default attire for us kids was blue chambray shirts and Levis; occasional departures from this costume were in the form of short pants and the occasional chino trousers. Thus in groups we might look to bystanders like escapees from a reform school, and sometimes the improvisational “activities” reinforced this impression.

Last names were almost never used. It was Sandy, Eorr, Ruth, Steve, Lynne, Sally, Howie, Ed, Freddie, Penny, whoever. Everyone was supposed to be equal, but Eorr and Sandy were in charge, Eorr by force of personality and Sandy as surrogate patriarch, with the counselors only a notch or two above the kids during decision making.

4. On The Road

A mixture of cars and school busses was used for crossing the country and for numerous expeditions and camping trips during the summer to places of cultural, historical, and geological interest in New Mexico and nearby states. A few of the various vehicles over the years were purchased new, most notably a custom middle-sized bus, known as the “Red Bus”, which contained a simple kitchen at the rear. Most of them were bought at auction, which meant that breakdowns were frequent throughout each summer. These breakdowns often resulted in altered plans and improvisations on the fly, and thus the busses became unwitting players at Cibola. Many of the most memorable “adventures” came about because of break-downs.

One “car” deserves special mention, the Ford touring car. This was a Ford V-8 sedan stretched to have 4 bench seats, seating 12, a predecessor of today’s stretch limousines. The camp artist/counselor, Dante Radice, painted this long car to look like a cross between a grasshopper and a centipede. Dante painted “eyes” around the headlights, a series of “grasshopper legs” along both sides, and stripes down the rounded trunk at the rear, all in color in contrast to the basic Ford black. Naturally, this eye-catching vehicle was EOrr’s favorite.

It is important to understand the highway system at the mid-century epoch of Cibola. A few limited-access toll roads and turnpikes had been built, but the Interstate Highway System was started only in the last Cibola years. The better highways were mostly two-lane undivided roads. In the desert southwest gravel roads were more common by far than paved highways. Each trip was thus an adventure because tourism was rare. We were the tourists: a bus load of scruffy teens stopping at an indigenous store for fuel and sodas at, say, Chinlee, Arizona in the heart of the Navajo lands. The “recreational vehicle”, with the exception of the silvery Gulfstream trailer, had not yet been invented.

We crossed the US from Washington, D.C., to San Cristobal and back in “caravans” lasting a week. Kids came by train from Boston, and Westchester County, NY, and more were picked up when the caravan stopped near Cleveland and Chicago on the way. Each caravan was routed to stop overnight at state parks with a different routing almost every summer. Each person had a sleeping bag. There were no tents so stormy weather meant moving to any dry place available, like in the busses, or even under them. These conditions also prevailed during the several bus camping trips each summer that took us to places of interest in the Southwest. Outdoor camping was a major departure for most of us, coming as we did from urban or suburban middle class homes, and it was one of the forces contributing to our personal growth.

There were two main difficulties in riding in school busses for most of seven consecutive days. The first was boredom. This became most acute in the flat farmland between the Mississippi River and the Rockies. We used many ad hoc pastimes to relieve the boredom. The second difficulty was “fanny fatigue”, brought about by sitting on hard bench seats for hours on end. This often resulted in rather wierd yoga-like positions, not always healthy for our spines.

5. At the Ranch

A combination of roll call and mail call gathered everyone after breakfast in the central patio. The day’s schedule was announced by EOrr and work crews were assigned for the morning work parties. The camp was also divided up for afternoon activities like sports, horseback riding, work and rehearsals for theater productions, reading time in the library, music, and art. Every kid rode on at least one overnight pack trip each summer on horseback up into the high mountains above the ranch.

Two ranchers from the community of San Cristobal played key roles at the Ranch. Carlos Trujillo, an expert horseman, was in charge of the stables and the care of the horses. Carlos also accompanied the overnight pack trips into the mountains above the ranch as guide and conductor, a role he often conceded in part to EOrr. Gabriel Romero was expert in maintaining the infrastructure of the ranch, and he was in charge of many work parties involved with cabin repair and construction. Every kid respected Carlos and Gabriel for their patience and for their obvious competence at practical tasks with which few if any kids had any familiarity whatsoever. Several Trujillo and Romero kids joined us in parts of camp life over the years.

6. Exploration Camping Trips

The busses were used for occasional expeditions to points of interest. The most frequent destinations were ruins from the vanished Anasazi Indians and were concentrated in the four corners region. These trips were for several days, with camping on the way. Unlike today, other visitors to remote sites like Chaco Canyon, the Gila Cliff Dwellings, and Canyon De Chelly were rarely if ever encountered, few restrictions were in place, and we Cibolites felt free to explore at will. These expeditions were concentrated in the lands of the present Navajo and Hopi native Americans, and exposed us kids to the sparse living conditions of these desert tribes, as well as to contemporary pueblo villages. Most of us came to appreciate the beautiful geology of New Mexico.

7. Arts and Activities

Cibola produced several theater productions each summer, with the village of San Cristobal invited as audience. In addition to simulated Commedia Dell'arte productions, modern plays like Dylan Thomas' "Under Milk Wood" were typical, the latter produced in the round. A significant fraction of the kids and of the counselors were musicians. Folk music was the most common genre. Many summers Cibola presented a theater production or a production of western songs (think "Cool Water" and "Tumbling Tumbleweeds") for the annual Taos fiesta. As a rule, free self expression was encouraged by EOrr and Sandy. By the end of the summer most kids would start singing together at the first strum of a guitar or banjo.

The large recreation room on the second floor of the main building was used for evening events, which varied from lectures to contests. On Saturday nights it was turned into a dance floor, with 45rpm records on a portable player as the orchestra. This was the age of "Bye, Bye Love", "Hound Dog", and "I Walk The Line".

8. Exposure to Hispanic and Southwestern Indian Cultural Values

The Orrs were educators. The history of the Southwest and its indigenous cultures were important topics at Cibola. In addition to bus trips and expeditions, there were often lectures and discussions of these topics, usually conducted by EOrr. Cibola visited nearby communities along the greater Rio Grande watershed. One visit stands out: Feast Day at Santo Domingo Pueblo with its corn dances in 1959. One of the busses had a serious break down on the way to the event. A passing truck brought the kids to the pueblo toward the end of the native dances. The bus was out of commission, leaving us passengers stranded. EOrr somehow talked the lieutenant governor of the Pueblo to let us all sleep on the porch of his adobe house, not for one night but for two until the bus was repaired. Our pueblo hosts fed us their food. This was the first, and maybe the only time that non-native Americans stayed overnight at the Santo Domingo Pueblo. Every one of us came away with a personal understanding of the

kindness of these fine people. Many of us will always remember the two nights of quiet, broken only by the occasional barking dog.

9. Unpredictable Wackiness!: “What is going to happen next?”

Without doubt, the most unusual characteristic of Cibola was not knowing what was going to happen next. This characteristic closely followed the character of Eleanor Orr, EOrr, an educator who was driven internally to teach, to innovate, to communicate the essence of “being in the moment”, and also to be the center of things. Around EOrr the question is not “Why?”; it is rather “Why Not?”. It is as if Eleanor was the director of an improvisational theater as large as the nearest horizon and with a cast of 50 or so teenage boys and girls. Every one of us “kids” has their favorite stories. Here are a few of mine:

* The caravan is returning east through Kansas on a 100F day. The city swimming pool is locked up because it is Sunday. We climb the chain link fence to cool off. One kid cuts his hand on the fence, requiring a visit to the local hospital. The sheriff, alerted by the hospital, stops our bus 10 miles out of town. EOrr talks our way out of this bind, and we go on our way.

* At the entrance booth to the Kansas turnpike, a girl in the rear bench seat of the Ford touring car, tosses out a note to the booth attendant which says we are being kidnapped. EOrr is driving this strange looking car, and is not in on the prank. Pulled over a few miles down the toll road by the highway patrol, EOrr talks her way out of this one, too.

* Sandy took the big yellow bus over the continental divide on a scenic but rarely travelled dirt road in Colorado. After starting the steep, winding descent there was without warning a sudden complete brake failure. Sandy was able to complete the descent in very dangerous circumstances, with the kids on foot part of the way, by using the transmission to creep down several thousand feet after the emergency brake wore out. On two occasions large rocks thrown under the rear wheels stopped the bus just in time for Sandy to reverse at switchbacks.

* In passing through South Bend, Indiana, someone in EOrr’s bus noticed an open door into the Notre Dame football stadium at field level. This led to an impromptu game of coed touch football before a massive crowd of zero. We have photographs.

* On the way to Canyon De Chelly, EOrr stopped the bus at a Federal boarding school for Navajo children, at Lucachukai, Arizona. An educator herself, EOrr persuaded the school’s principal, who happened to be there at the time, to give us kids a lecture on the purpose of the boarding school, the problems with taking Navajo children from their homes for months at a time, and insights into the language difficulties between English and Navajo, including transcribing and pronunciation.

* On one trip we were in the yellow bus in Navajo land on a fine sunny warm day. The road was a gravel surfaced road in good condition winding through mountain forests. EOrr stopped the bus and turned to us and asked “Who would like to ride up on the roof?”. Many of us jumped at the chance. One of my most powerful and valued memories is of eight or nine of us kids riding the roof, each with a hand gripping the 10-inch luggage rail, the only barrier to falling off, with the bus traveling perhaps 20 miles per hour. I can still smell the pinon pine to this day.

* Every summer there was an All Night Dance, just because that would be different.

* A famous incident happened on caravan returning east one August. We stopped at a service area on the Pennsylvania Turnpike where the restaurant was serving lunch. This was around 1959, and the clientele was a mixture of truckers and ordinary families. EOrrr had gotten everyone to practise singing and dancing a silly song, "Farmer Brown". We spread through the table area and sang the song, with accompanying choreographed body motions, to the consternation of the now silent lunching public. After the song, there was a certain amount of milling around the tables by us kids, out of spending money at the end of the summer, with an occasional grab at uneaten food on plates. One girl, about 17 year old, was stopped by the management from eating some abandoned french fries, whereupon, thinking fast, she explained that she was pregnant!

* The "Bank Prank" is notorious, but the details are sketchy and varied.

Molly Moore-Romero reports: "As I recall the 'bank prank', we were in Lawrence, Kansas, stranded when the yellow bus broke down. It was so broken down, that the normal one-day repair was not an option, so the Orrs began looking for a replacement bus. We were staying in the local park.

"The purchase of the new, used bus took three days to accomplish, and I can only imagine how they finagled buying a new bus while on the road with 1950's archaic finance options. In any case, they were trying to entertain all of us for three, long days in Lawrence.

"One day we were "in town" with Eorr, and she spied a bank across the street, a typical small town bank in the days before branch banking. I think she must have had a bit of Sundance Kid in her. She came up with the idea that we would form a long line, single file, all on our hands and knees, with Eorr in the lead, we would follow her wherever she went. Of course, she went everywhere she was not supposed to, entering the bank and winding our way around the lobby, then finding our way behind the tellers who were standing at the teller windows, all of us crawling right behind her. As I recall, no one in the bank was amused, at least not as amused as we were."

A version differing mainly in the location comes from Joe Ferber: [It] "took place in Springfield, Ill. A bunch of us kids were accompanying Eorr to the bank when she or one of us campers suggested we crawl into the bank. So, on our hands and knees about a dozen of us followed Eorr into the bank as she went to one of the tellers. There were many a shocked, some dazed, a few smiles... on the faces of the bank employees and customers. Eorr did talk our way out of this situation, although the word was that we were not invited to return to the conservative capitol."

* There are many other "wacky" Cibola stories. [The author is waiting for more examples from other Cibolites for inclusion here, including the "kidnapping of Penny" and crashing the outdoor theater, as well as others.]

10. The Legacy of Cibola

Every one of us who was a teen "kid" at Cibola carries lasting memories of belonging to a very special group of new and old friends and of learning about the mysteries of the Southwest, its culture, its history and its beauty. The Cibola experience, with its adventures, muses, and improvisation, is very difficult to convey to ordinary people, which makes the experience even more valuable. As one "girl", emailed me recently, "Whenever I give even a hint of that time in my life to friends, their responses are usually dumbfoundedness or astonishment. To make it even more astonishing to them, most friends are younger than I, so have trouble understanding our times, and generally have no idea such a place could ever have existed. I think they view me with doubt, thinking I made it all up...."

From the mutual trust engendered by sharing unusual and sometimes daring experiences and from becoming a cohesive and interdependent group of teenagers, we “kids” learned to take some of society’s standards with a considered grain of salt.

So when a new acquaintance asks me, “Why are you different?”, my answer is, “Why not!”

11. The 2010 Gathering

On the weekend of June 18, 2010, there will be a gathering of Cibolites and former students of Sandy and Eleanor Orr in Georgetown, DE. Eleanor Orr died in 2008. Sandy Orr is in excellent health at 85 years and will be attending the gathering. We anticipate on the order of 50 folks to join Sandy for the weekend. About half of these will be Cibola “kids”.

I am collecting every photograph possible of Cibola (and the first years of the Hawthorne School) for digitization and large-screen display. Displaying the photographs will not only entertain the attendees, but may also help trigger memories which are half a century old.

I am also collecting, mainly from Sandy Orr, documents from the Cibola days, such as the personnel rosters, the daily plans with assignments for work parties, theater, pack trips and all the other activities each day. At the last day at the ranch, EOrr required each camper to write a personal statement of what Cibola meant to him or her; a number of these statements have been preserved, and some are very moving and characteristic of the teenage character development that the Cibola experience invoked.

It is my intention to produce CD-ROMs or DVDs containing all this material, photographs and documents, as a digital archive of Cibola. If possible I want to record recollections and memories of the Cibola experiences in the voices of the “kids”, now mostly senior in retirement, as an audio record, during the June gathering.

In fact the June gathering is an ideal setting, with its memory-provoking presentation of the photographs and documents, for collecting audio (possible audio-video) material for a DVD program on Cibola, along the lines of “This American Life”, on NPR. Audio remembrances, if any, will be included in the digital archive. At the moment my tentative plan is to make the presentation in HTML so that browsers can access it.