

THE WEST VIRGINIA 4-H CAMP SPIRIT STICK

The 4-H spirit stick, used throughout the West Virginia camping program, has become a symbol of tribal spirit, unity, and cooperation, but it actually began as a National Cheerleaders Association (NCA) tradition.

During the 1954 summer NCA Cheer Camp, one team stood out from the other teams. This team was not recognized as having great technical skill, but, because of their spirit, they were the “backbone of the camp.” They were the first to arrive in the morning for class and the last to leave. Working together as a team, they displayed a great cooperative spirit and cheered for other teams. What that team symbolized was far more than any display of talent or technical skill. The team members represented the pure essence at the very core of cheerleading and exemplified spirit in every sense of the word. At that time, however, the NCA scoring system did not reward teams just for spirit.

L. “Herkie” Herkimer, director of the NCA camp, wanted to recognize this team because its vibrant, positive spirit bolstered the entire camp. This was just the quality that Herkie wanted to instill in the National Cheerleaders Association. He realized that the camp scoring and award program would not recognize this team. But he wanted something to acknowledge the impact this team had on the entire camp. Herkie pulled a twig from a nearby tree, declared it the official “spirit stick” and awarded it to the team that exemplified the true spirit of camp.

The NCA spirit stick over the years evolved from a twig, cut and painted in Herkie’s garage, to a red, white, and blue wooden dowel. Today, it is manufactured by the thousands, and it is an integral part of cheer camp.

In 1978, during the Webster County 4-H camp, the tribe displaying the most cooperative spirit was awarded a spirit stick. During the early 1980s, the tradition of the spirit stick spread throughout the 4-H camping program. A recent survey of West Virginia county 4-H programs showed that 45 of the 48 counties surveyed use spirit sticks in camping programs.

In most 4-H camps, the spirit stick is 4 to 5 feet in length and is painted in colors representing the four tribes. During the week, the spirit stick is awarded to different tribes representing the cooperation and spirit displayed during daily camp events. At the end of 4-H camp, usually during the final council circle, the spirit stick is awarded to one tribe or person who exemplifies the true spirit of camp.

Counties have established different traditions for what happens to the spirit stick at the end of camp. Many counties burn the spirit stick in the council fire to symbolize leaving the spirit in camp. Others use the same stick year after year, signifying the return of the spirit to camp. Here are some county traditions:

1. After it is awarded to a tribe or person, the spirit stick is returned to camp organizers for use year after year.

2. After it is awarded to a tribe or person, the spirit stick is divided into four sections and immediately burned in the camp fire by the tribal chiefs.
3. The winning tribal chief or spirit of camp takes the spirit stick home and returns it to camp next year, when it is burned in the Monday night council circle fire.
4. The winning tribal chief or spirit of camp takes the spirit stick home to keep.
5. The tribal chiefs take a section of the spirit stick home to keep.

Recommendations:

County 4-H camping programs should take great care to develop spirit stick traditions that seek to reward the spirit of unity and cooperation in 4-H camp. Campers should be educated in the meaning of the spirit stick as well as how it is awarded. Competition should not be overemphasized but cooperative spirit rewarded. 4-H colors and symbols can be used to decorate camp spirit sticks, but it is not appropriate to adorn spirit sticks with feathers or other Native American symbols.

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