

HISTORY

The Yale Outdoor Education Center was founded and named by Yale Medal recipient Edward C. Migdalski, father of the current director, who was the director from its creation in 1966 to 1984, when his son Tom took over management. Ed passed away in 2009 at age 91. He was a pioneer of the outdoor recreation concept and club sports movement nationally, and the author of nine outdoor-sports books, primarily on fishes and fishing. Prior to joining the Athletics Department in 1966, Ed was a world explorer, specimen collector and taxidermist at Yale's Peabody Museum in New Haven. Some of his work is still present there. His taxidermy work is also viewable in the fish display case on the OEC boat dock.

Prior to 1966, the OEC was called the Yale Engineering Camp, part of the Sheffield Scientific School, which was used for summer field-work experience for Yale students enrolled in the Engineering program. Some of the land was purchased by Yale, but most of it was gifted by donors for Yale's use in perpetuity.

Yale dissolved civil engineering as major study in the mid-1960s, which is when Ed Migdalski was given control of the camp for two years on a trial basis to see if he could successfully turn it into a recreation center after his presentation to then Yale treasurer Charles Gage.

The cabins and other buildings were constructed in the early 1920s. The cabins were the summer dorm rooms for field study students, and they were comprised of five rooms each with one exterior door each. You could not walk between rooms, and they only contained two bunk beds and a single pull-chain light bulb hanging from the ceiling per room. There were no sinks, refrigeration, kitchenette, running water or decks.

The dining hall, which we now rent for special events like weddings, receptions and meetings, was a dining hall back then, too, staffed by two cooks, and the students would walk up the footpath from the cabins for three meals a day there. The showerhouse was only one large room, not divided into three like now, with two open tin showers and long, trough-like wash sinks with 10 faucets each for wash-up before meals. Back then, Yale wasn't coed, so it was an all men's camp; thus, the open showers weren't an issue.

The woods used to come right up to the front (lake side) of the dining hall, and there was therefore no view of the lake; likewise, we added the deck off the front to enhance special occasion usage. We also finished the bare floors, installed new windows, and added interior siding. The wood tables and benches in the hall are original antiques to the mid-1920s. But the sink, stove, hot water and refrigeration are all newer.

The outhouses back then were wooden and two-seaters, and one would sprinkle lime (like the white, granular type used on lawns) into the outhouse after doing one's business to "cure" it; in other words, they were "dry" with no liquid. They had a trap door behind them, and a caretaker would shovel them out each winter.

Besides renovating the cabins, we widened the roads, previously only one lane and passable only by means of pullovers. Drivers would honk their horn in advance or be forced to back up a long distance to the last pullover. The speed bumps in our road were always there, but they are equally for water drainage purposes, and not just speed bumps. Their old-time name is a "Thank-

You Mam” because on steep, long hills (not located here), they were used for horses to take a break and rest wagon wheels against them.

We built the pavilion in 1981, which was funded by a Mr. Don Hopkins, who paid for construction materials, and the Yale Graduate School of Architecture designed it and provided the labor as part of its graduation requirement. The design was one chosen by Ed Migdalski for its detached cooking area via a “breezeway,” one of a number in a competition from a series of to-scale models built by the grad students.

The picnic groves never existed either, and it was just a wooded shore where the tables are now, and it looked like the rest of the lake’s wooded shoreline. Likewise, we added the grass beach, sand beach, swim dock, boat dock and gazebo, all through alumni donations. (Please contact the OEC director if you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution for a special project or purchase at the Outdoor Center.)

Cabin 7 & 8 used to be one long cabin, like the others, and it was in front of the pavilion between the recreation cabin and the cabin 9. Tom Migdalski cut down two straight oak trees, and we built a sled from them. Caretaker Bill Kowalski cut the cabin in half with a chainsaw, and we used a bulldozer and a backhoe to load them onto the oak-tree sled and drag them to their current position.

We originally built the goat pen as a duck pond with a dozen ducks, and water pumped in from the lake. But predators got after the ducks. After that, it housed sheep for a few summers.

All the property surrounding the lake is private and owned by Yale. The dam, which is around to the right side, is state-controlled for water-level safety. The boat launch, located to the left and around the bend, is also state owned. The water itself is state controlled; therefore, anyone may swim or launch from the state ramp, but nobody may go ashore elsewhere on the lake. Motorboats are allowed from the state launch only, but the lake has an 8-mph speed limit. You also must have a state inland-waters fishing license to fish in the lake, which is named Powers Lake.

The current director Tom Migdalski started his “employment” at the OEC as a young boy, raking the entire beach each night for .50 from his father’s pocket. Tom was a lifeguard here through his high school and college days, eventually being promoted to waterfront director and assistant director. He has made four lifesaving rescues at the Center.

During the school year, Tom, who holds a Master’s Degree in Recreation and College Teaching, is the director of club sports and intramurals at Yale. Like his father, he is the author of many outdoor recreation magazine articles and three books.