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Thomasville Times

Your tri-weekly source for community news

Thursday's Internet Edition, July 05, 2007.

Camp offers opportunities for children

Staff Writer Kevin Reid - DENTON — Just a few hundred yards south of N.C. 47 on the west side of Summerville Church Road lies a little bit of paradise unknown to most Davidson County residents.

“It’s the best kept secret in Davidson County,” said Melody Allen of Camp Walter Johnson.

Camp Walter Johnson is the only Salvation Army camp in North and South Carolina. It serves children from both states throughout the summer. There are only 133 Salvation Army camps throughout the world. During the months when school is in session, the campgrounds are rented out to church groups, civic groups, nonprofit corporations, as well as for-profit businesses and any other group. Allen serves as its marketing director.

“We have large groups and small groups coming here,” Allen said. “We accommodate corporate people who want to brainstorm their ideas as well as churches that bring people here for spiritual renewal.”

This bucolic, 267-acre location along an eastern tributary of High Rock Lake is an ideal spot for both a retreat for adults or a campground for children. There is also the man-made Camp Walter Johnson Lake, which is not for swimming, but fishing is allowed. For swimmers, there is also a pool on the premises. Pontoon boating is another water-related activity at the camp.

The camp is indeed named after Walter Johnson, but not the famous pitcher of the Washington Senators. This Walter Johnson, who lived where the camp is, became a legend himself. He was a wealthy buyer and seller of land.

“Walter Johnson went to my church,” said Allen, a native of Denton. “My grandfather and my father knew him. Despite all the wealth he accumulated, he was a very down-to-earth guy.”

Late in his life, Johnson was inspired to leave his land to the Salvation Army after learning that his tractor mechanic had been treated so well by the organization earlier in his life when he was destitute.

From the last week of May through the first week of August, Camp Walter Johnson serves as home to over 1,500 children throughout the Carolinas. Each week a new group of children comes in. Along with the aquatic activities, children can enjoy miniature golf, pedal carts, rock climbing, softball and other endeavors. They also receive spiritual and moral counseling.

“Most of the children who come here are members of the Salvation Army Church

or the Boys and Girls Club,” Allen said. “We just want to provide a good experience for the children of the community.”

Capt. Ken Oakes, who directs Salvation Army operations in Davidson County, pointed out that one does not have to be a member of a Boys and Girls Club or Salvation Army Church to attend the camp.

“I’d like any child in Davidson County to be able to come here, but before I send them, I have to make sure they’re not in trouble with the law or anything like that,” Oakes said. “I encourage the parents of anybody who wants to go to this camp to get to know me and get involved with our organization. This doesn’t mean I won’t take somebody off the street and send them to camp, providing I know who they are and can guarantee the counselors out here that that they’re not going to be a problem.”

There are about 70 staff members at Camp Walter Johnson. Cabins and lodges provide sleeping facilities for about 367 people. The dining hall feeds 300-500 people each meal.

There are also meeting facilities and conference centers, such as the one used by the Salvation Army of Davidson County’s board of advisers, which met there Thursday. After the meeting, Allen took the advisers on a tour of the camp. The board members were positively impressed.

“I think its a great facility,” said Thomasville Mayor Joe Bennett, who is also a Salvation Army board member. “It’s a secret down here that not many folks know about it until they come and see it.”

Salvation Army Captains Tarryl and Sharon Ray will be moving from Missouri to take over direction of the camp next week.

“We are blessed by God to have a facility like this available for us to minister the children,” Oakes said, “It is now an even bigger blessing that we can allow other groups to use it throughout the year to come here and get away for a while. I appreciate all the work that Melody does to make that possible.”

Allen stressed that money collected from rentals went back into the camp. One facility camp officials would like to see funds raised for is a performing arts center for the conservatories of music held for children who attend the camp.

No children are turned away from camp for financial reasons. Many — if not most — attend the camp for no charge.

“I’ve worked for several organizations, but the Salvation Army is above board all the way,” Allen said.

For more information on Camp Walter Johnson, visit www.campwj.com.

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This is an on-line
publication of

**The Thomasville
Times**

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