

## Canoe base leader ...Outdoorsman Sandy Bridges

By Dominic P. Papatola

© Duluth News-Tribune. All rights reserved. (Photo by Kathy Strauss/News-Tribune)

*News-Tribune staff writer*

These days, the idea that anyone would spend more than three decades working in the same place seems as unlikely as a kid from Arkansas deciding to endure winters in the north woods.

Sandy Bridges did both.

The 57-year-old native of Little Rock retired this spring as the director of the Charles L. Sommers National High Adventure Base. The base, near Ely on Moose Lake at the edge of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, has outfitted tens of thousands of Boy Scouts from throughout the country and around the world for their first taste of wilderness camping.

Bridges' tenure in Ely was marked by innovation and expansion. What was a sleepy base in the 1960s now boasts satellite bases in Atikokan, Ontario, and Bissett, Manitoba. The cold-weather camping program he started in Ely is now the Boy Scouts' national program. Through sheer tenacity with manufacturers, he refined dozens of camping products, from ski bindings and tents to life preservers and camp stoves.



Butch Diesslin, a former base staffer who now teaches at Vermilion Community College, said it's difficult to overstate Bridge's contributions to the base. "What did Sandy mean to the place? Sandy meant the place stayed open. That's the bottom line."

The scouting connection is strong for Clyde Sanders Bridges, who started as a Cub Scout at 8. At 13, he was working at Camp Quapaw between Little Rock and Hot Springs, Ark. By the time he was 17, he had made his first voyage through the Boundary Waters and had pretty much decided on a life that would keep him outdoors.

His academic career in forestry at Arkansas was cut short by service in the National Guard. His unit was called into active duty twice – once to integrate the high school from which he graduated and once to cover for domestic troops who had been sent abroad when the Berlin Wall was constructed.

So, after three years in college, he decided to spend a summer as a staff member at the Sommers base.

"I thought that I would come and spend a year," he recalled.

Bridges guided for a few other outfitters in the next few years. But from then on, the Northland was his home.

"The work that I had done here guiding really was, to me, the epitome of outdoor activities. I, for some reason, enjoyed the idea that I was not enclosed. If you take the Boundary Waters and the Quetico area, there's only a couple highways and a couple railroad tracks between there and the Arctic Circle."

In 1965, Bridges became the first full-time, year-round employee at the Scout base. In 1970, he was named director.

Working with the bureaucracy of the Boy Scouts wasn't always easy, recalled Diesslin, who was the assistant director at Sommers until 1980.

“I remember back in 1970, some of the scouters from Duluth requested a winter camping program,” he said. “If Sandy were less adventuresome, he would have said, ‘No, I’m sorry, that’s not part of the program.’ What Sandy said was, ‘Sure, come on up.’ The winter program existed unofficially for two years before he proposed it (to the Boy Scouts).”

The early 1970s were a turning point for the BWCAW, days when the discussions about limits on group sizes and other restrictions seemed likely to become a reality. In order to keep the Scout base viable and to assure Scout groups would continue to have access to the wilderness, Bridges developed small base camps in Atikokan and Bissett.

By the early 1980s, the national Boy Scouts organization made Bridges the administrator of a handful of other facilities scattered from Wisconsin to Maine.

“At that time, they decided that it was probably better for me to live closer to an airplane so that I could get around.” So beginning in 1983, Bridges began a dual life: from May through September, he lived in a wood-heated cabin on the base. The rest of the year, it was Duluth for Bridges and his family.

The salary working for the Boy Scouts wasn't lavish. In his early years in Ely, Bridges augmented his income as a trapper. Some years, he'd work for other outfitters in the region during the summer so that he could afford to spend the winter in Ely.

Author and Ely denizen Bob Cary, who traces his friendship with Bridges to those lean years, described his friend as a consummate outdoorsman, a guy whose deficiencies as an angler were more than compensated for by his prowess as a cook.

“He's straight as a string,” Cary said, “just the kind of guy you think the Boy Scouts should be putting out.”

Cary, who briefly ran a school for wilderness guides with Bridges, remembered that, for graduation, they would take the students out into the BWCAW shortly after the ice went out on the lakes. Often, the conditions weren't exactly optimal.

“Sandy always took the poorest paddler, and one time he had this sniveling little brat,” Cary recalled. “We were really getting pounded (by the weather) and this kid probably turned around and said ‘You're not doing much work back there, Mr. Bridges.’”

“He just said, ‘Lay the paddle down, kid,’ and then Sandy stayed up with everybody else paddling all by himself.”

Alumni of the Sommers post describe Bridges as a low-key leader, the kind of person who would mingle with Scouts and leaders anonymously – sometimes even cooking breakfast for them – to solicit ideas and opinions on how to improve the base.

Bridges was always trying to improve the experience for campers and staff: He didn't want to make the voyage through the BWCAW easier. Just better.

To that end, he helped design a Stearns canoe vest that's now commonly seen in the BWCAW. He worked with Alumacraft to improve a canoe. He worked his way on the telephone to the top of the Buck knife company to convince it to develop a more efficient folding knife.

“I'm not an inventor,” Bridges said. “I'm a refiner.”

Over the years, the base itself has been refined. Campers -- Bridges calls them “customers” -- now bunk in cabins instead of tents before they depart into the BWCAW. The outpost now has saunas, a trading post and a sophisticated dining facility. “Today's customer is much more discriminating,” he said.

Still, Bridges said, the essence of the Boundary Waters voyage remains the same as it was when he came to Ely -- the same, in fact, as when the Sommers post first opened in 1923.

“A 10-day trip in a wilderness area is not a recreational situation; it's really an experience,” Bridges said. “They literally learn to take care of themselves – they learn traditional skills that a lot of other people that go out on weekends or on a three- or four-day trip will never even come close to.”

Today, as he battles the lung cancer that pushed him into retirement a few years earlier than he planned, Bridges has few regrets.

Insurance liability issues and the highly contentious issues surrounding BWCA Wilderness management made his last years at the Sommers base more stressful than he might have liked. He's weary of the zealots on both sides of the wilderness debate and their entrenched positions. He's convinced that “a lot more people could be accommodated if a little more effort were put into cooperation instead of fighting.”

Bridges still believes that the BWCA Wilderness – and the Boy Scout base to which he's devoted more than half his life – will survive.

If everyone is careful and prudent, he said, the BWCAW will continue to offer its magic “for as long as people enjoy going out.”