

The Lakeshore Guardian, 2009 December
Thumb Habitats
Something About Silver Trails
by Bill Collins

It was July 1978. I was 15 and had just returned to my parents' home in Fort Gratiot from a 10-day backpacking trip at Philmont Scout Ranch in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of northern New Mexico, the first of three trips I would make out there. I was very lucky to be in Troop 169 for many reasons. Each summer, my Scoutmasters, Reginald Nuss and Orville Swick, led a large contingent of Boy Scouts from the Blue Water Council to Philmont and encouraged all of us in the troop to go.

Just settling back into summer at home, I got a phone call from Orville. He said they were looking for some help up at Silver Trails on summer camp staff and figured I was perfect for the job. Soon, I was at the scout office in Port Huron to fill out an application and negotiate my pay. Bruce Hoover, the Camp Director that summer, on loan from the Army as I recall, suggested they pay me the same as I was making on my Times Herald paper route. I think it worked out to \$15 per day.

Most people in the area are familiar with Silver Trails Scout Reservation near Jeddo, over 300 acres along the Saint Clair - Sanilac County line, between Jeddo and Fisher Roads, on the west side of Black River. Silver Trails is the home camp of the Blue Water Council Boy Scouts of America. The camp dates back to the 1940s and was partly developed by local Rotary Clubs. A large part of Silver Trails is mature Beech - Sugar Maple forest with very scenic creeks and ravines lined by Eastern Hemlock and Yellow Birch. It is one of the best remaining examples of this habitat in the Thumb.



Ravine and creek in the north of Silver Trails. Photograph by Bill Collins.



Hemlock covered ridge in the north of Silver Trails. Photograph by Bill Collins.

I started going to summer camp at Silver Trails in 1974 and it was a familiar home for our troop's many year-round campouts. Following somewhat of a tradition started by my Scoutmaster's sons, my wife and I even got married at the camp chapel along Silver Creek in 1997.

On staff in 1978, I was a CIT, a Counselor In Training, and ended up helping the Nature Director, Chris Walker from the Lexington area. He turned out to be one of my best friends and a great inspiration to pursue the study of nature. Chris patiently quizzed me on the names of nearly every plant along our paths. In just a few days, I learned many woodland plants and several forest birds by their calls. I always wondered at certain plants in the woods around home, but it was a new concept to me that anyone should have named them all.

Back in those days they ran 5 or 6 weeks of Boy Scout summer camp, with a week or two of Cub Scout day camp before. I worked the whole shift from 1979 through 1986, except 1981 to paint pipes at Consumers Power in Marysville, and 1985 to concentrate on MSU. Summer camp was generally eliminated after 1986.

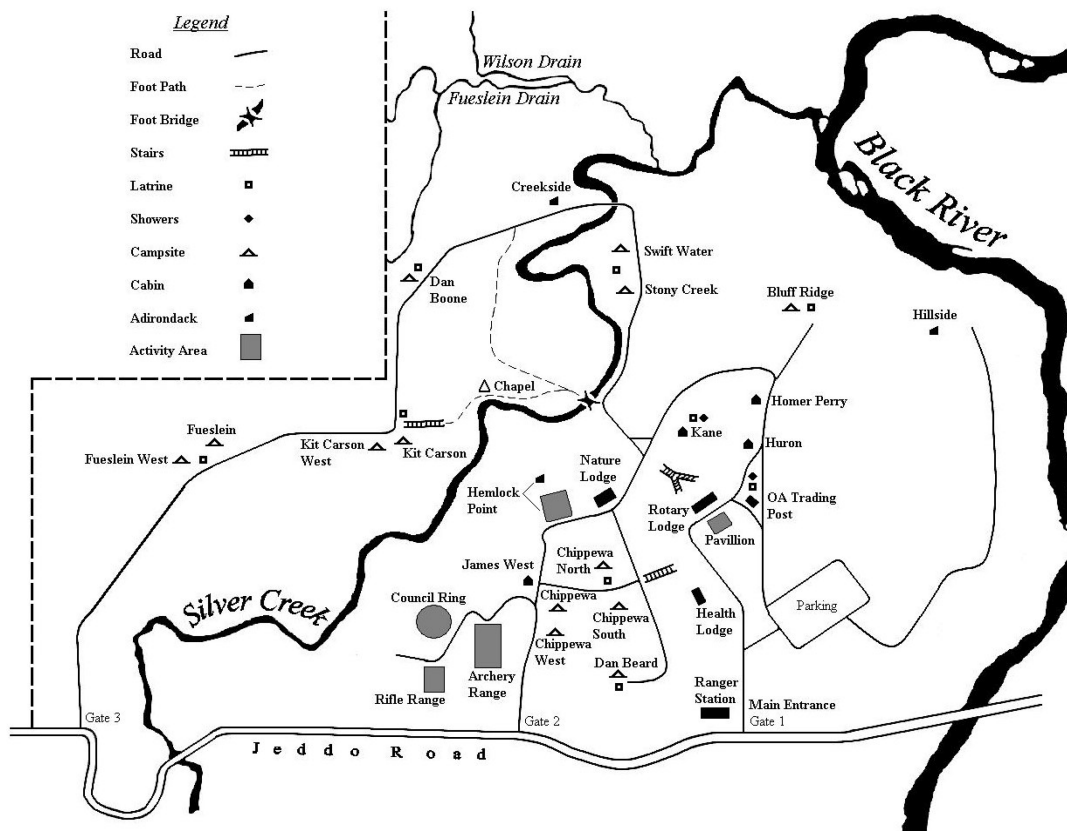
I can easily say my summers at Silver Trails were the best times of my life. For me, there was nothing more exciting than going up to Silver Trails for the first day of Staff Week, the work week before camp started, when only the staff was there. It was a lot of work setting up heavy canvas tents and steel cots across the camp in the summer heat, but it was a great time for camaraderie, camp fires, planning the summer program, and yes, sometimes general hell-raising. What do you expect from about 15 young men with a camp all to themselves. We had hundreds of acres of woods, miles of trails, the Black River, creeks, a pond, boats, a rifle and archery range, a trading post with pop on-tap, an old truck, big bonfires, and a pool. It doesn't get much better than that.



SILVER TRAILS SCOUT RESERVATION

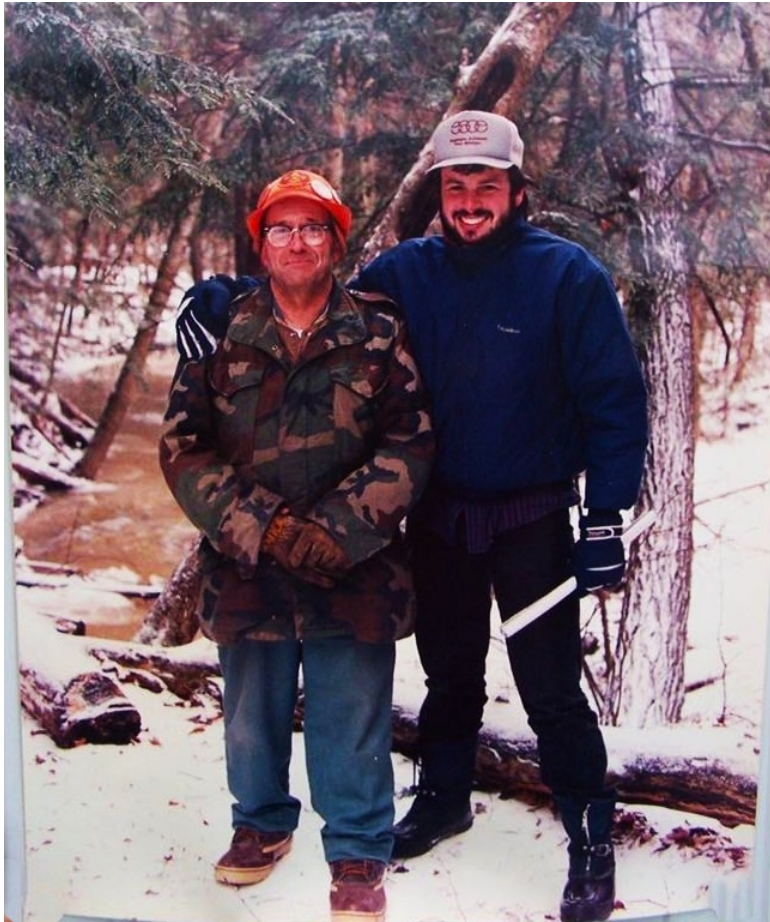
St. Clair County, MI Blue Water Council, Boy Scouts of America

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First known geographically accurate map of Silver Trails, slightly modified by someone. Originally drawn by Bill Collins with assistance from Neil Wakeman of SSOE, Inc..

In 1980 I was undecided whether to work at camp a third summer or not, knowing I was soon going to have to pay for college. I came home from school and my mother had bought me 2 or 3 nature guides. It was a sign and I set to preparing for another summer on staff. For anyone at Silver Trails from 1980 on, if you remember a guy nicknamed "Yoda", that was me. This was the doing of the Pool Director, John Sturtridge, now an attorney I have heard. One night, the staff went down to the Huron Theater in Port Huron to see the second Star Wars film. There was Yoda in a little hut in the swamp with plants and snakes. John turned around and said something like, "Hey, that's you nature boy! You're Yoda!" It stuck. Some still know me as "Yoda" and Yoda is still at work teaching nature.



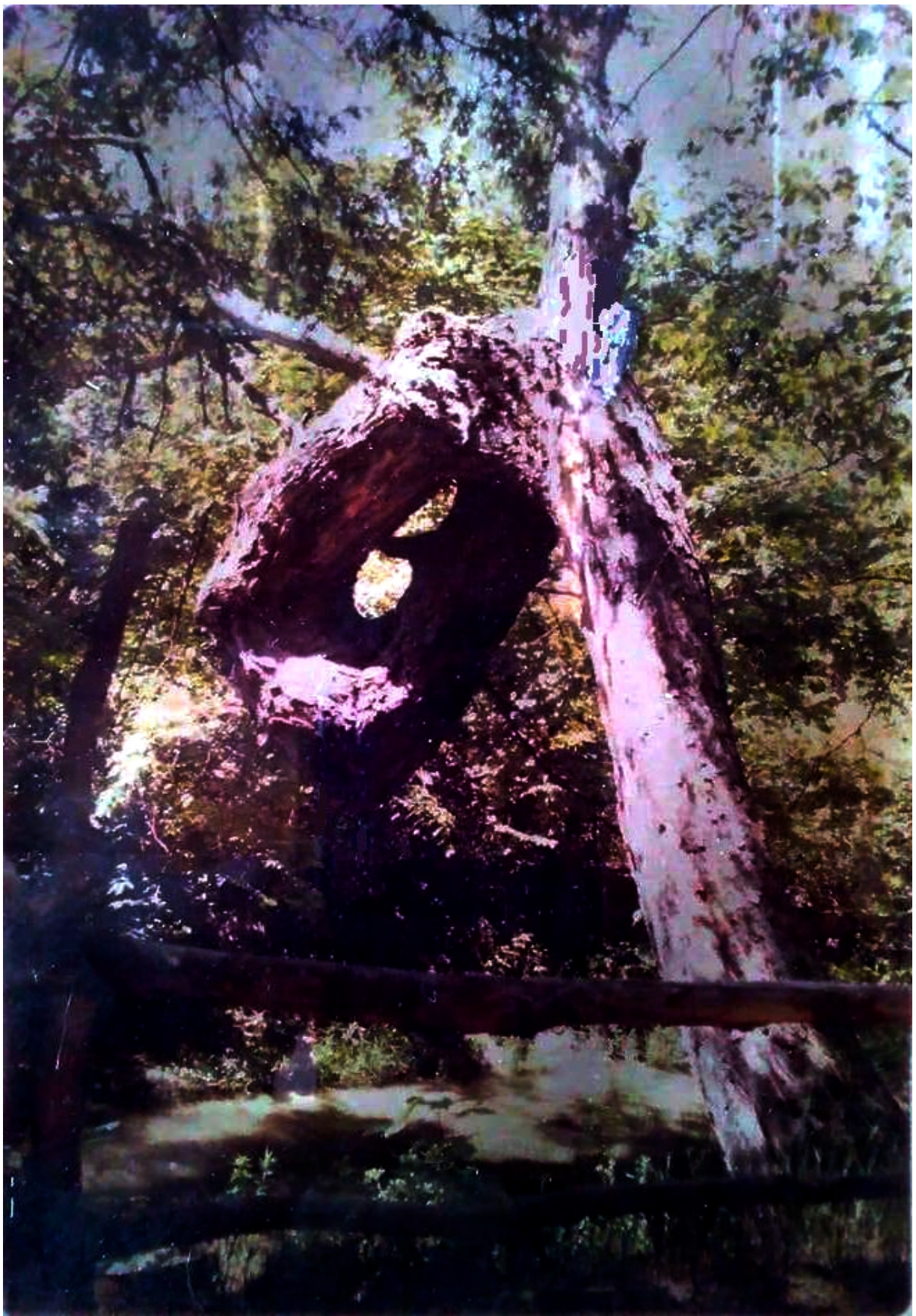
Camp Ranger John Hardie and Bill Collins in the north of Silver Trails at Fueslein Drain confirming boundaries of the first known geographically accurate map of the camp shown on the previous page. Draft map held in Bill's hand. Photograph by Dale Perry. Winter 1991.



Silver Trails gate, shut after the camp sale in 2019.



Silver Trails Scout Reservation boundaries on 2019 aerial photograph. The gravel pit on the north end of the camp was to be a lake for scout training and recreational activities, but ended up being the undoing of the camp.



The Number 9 Tree on the bank of Silver Creek, long-time symbol of Silver Trails.