

## *The Dining Experience*

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Mealtimes are the one detail of summer camp that stay with me today. When thinking back to summers past, I remember the occasional hiking trip or swimming in the lake, but I can vividly recall the heavy, sweaty smell of the dining hall. I can remember snatches of conversation passed around the tables, girls gushing over a particularly hot male counselor, guys discussing their next attack on the girls' cabins. Mealtime was chaotic, loud, noisy, boisterous, and one of the best experiences of being a camper.

As I stood in front of Kimball Hall on the grounds of Palmer Institute, gazing at the yellow columns by the front doors, I could see myself as a young camper peering into the dining hall, awaiting mealtime. I pictured the now empty space being filled with tables reminiscent of those at camp and the seats occupied by dozens of giggling, talking children. The actual dining experience at Kimball Hall, however, was nothing like the lighthearted meals of my camping days. Under the watchful eye of Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown, dinner at Palmer Institute was a serious affair and a lesson in etiquette. Mealtimes at Palmer Institute were not times for the students to relax or to take a break after studying hard all day. Every meal was a chance for students to learn. The proper placements of a linen napkin in the lap or of the silverware on the plate at the end of a meal were important lessons.

Each month, a student was designated to ring the bell located between Kimball Hall and the girls' dormitory. When the hour neared dinner, the student would go to the bell tower and set the bell in motion. As the peals filled the air throughout campus, each student would quickly abandon his or her homework, hurry down the steps of the dorm, and scurry over to Kimball Hall, knowing that if they were not in place in the dining hall before the bell was silenced, they would be going without food. Girls entered the dining hall through the building's left entrance, a much closer trek than the boys, as they had to hightail it from the complete opposite end of the campus to enter through the right side of the building. Conniving boys knew that if they were in good standing with the "Bell Ringer" that they might be able to convince him to ring the bell just a bit longer so that they could be on time to dinner. Going without food until breakfast the next morning was not something to look forward to.

Once every student was standing at his or her place at the table, collars straight and jackets buttoned, all students would sing grace together. Then the young men would pull the chairs out for the young ladies beside them, carefully push their chairs in closer to the table, and then take their own seats. As fellow students served food, the Palmer students would pass the food around the table in a family atmosphere as a teacher instructed them to always pass to the left. Students learned which fork went with which course and to always start from the outside and work in. Conversation would be polite; students would discuss literature, philosophy, and weather, always with inside voices. Mealtime at Palmer was completely structured unlike the rowdy, no rules dining of my summer camp days.

Summer days passed as my fellow campers and I canoed down calm rivers; swam out to the wooden dock in the midst of the murky lake water; and played basketball with a half inflated ball while the sun shined down and cast dark shadows on the crumbling

surface of the court. As the day began to cool off and the sun moved toward the west in the sky, the dinner bell rang, sounding throughout the entire camp. Counselors and campers alike would trek up the hill together to the rustic wooden dining hall to wait outside the weathered screen doors as the cafeteria staff put the last touches on dinner. Young female campers grouped together with hands clasped to play “Down By the River.” Male campers isolated themselves and rolled their eyes at us girls as they recounted the makeshift baseball game played earlier in the day.

As we sat down at our tables, we greeted our tablemates and then we said the blessing as a group. Two campers would be designated as the “servers” and would be up and down during the meal to refill the Kool-aid pitcher or to get more buttery, but slightly burned biscuits from the kitchen. Though we ate with our counselors, we felt no need to be well-behaved during meals. Food fights often broke out, campers flinging overcooked green beans at one another. Periodically, a table would break out singing the “Kissing” song, calling on a camper by name to kiss a crush. Oh, how we all prayed that we would not be the next to be singled out! After everyone at the table had sufficiently cleared his or her plate, eating whatever was actually palatable, the two servers would be left behind to clear up while everyone else filed out of the dining hall, talking and laughing, already thinking about the evening’s fast approaching campfire.

Thinking back on the unpredictable behavior of campers during dinner compared to the sophisticated manners of Palmer students, I cringe. While food fights and silly songs during dinner were fun, maybe campers should have had their own Dr. Browns. What would she have thought of the hustle and bustle in the dining hall? Would she have stood at the head of the room and clapped her hands to get everyone’s attention so that she could reprimand such rowdy behavior? Or would she would have seen the way the campers and counselors bonded through the laughter and shouts, that such behavior was not so detestable? Whatever her thoughts of the camper’s dinner manners, Dr. Brown’s rules in dining etiquette served her students better than kissing songs ever served campers. At the end of the day, the Palmer students were ready for high class restaurants while campers were ready to return to their school cafeterias.