

Summer camp joys shared by handicapped from Willowbrook

By ELAINE BOIES

Summer camps have been in full swing, with campers everywhere meeting nature on its home ground, exploring piney forest trails, chasing butterflies on the wing, ending their days with tired satisfaction.

Among this year's first-time summer campers are 311 retarded residents of Willowbrook State School, some of them suffering from cerebral palsy, deafness and other physical handicaps as well.

In a project instigated by Willowbrook's Benevolent Society, and supported by the school administration, 134 patients are enjoying a full sleep-away camp experience, while the remaining 177 are participating in a variety of day camp programs in Brooklyn and on Staten Island.

Last year the state Association for Retarded Children initiated Camp Catskill in Greenkill, N.Y. as a sleep-away facility for the retarded.

Funded jointly by ARC and the state Department of Mental Hygiene, the camp took 50 Willowbrook residents, but cut back to 40 this year.

That's when the Willowbrook Benevolent Society, a volunteer group composed mainly of parents of retarded children, sprang into action.

The Society donated \$1,000 to send five more youngsters to Camp Catskill, and in the process wondered why there couldn't be some kind of camping activity for a lot more patients.

In April, Willowbrook's social service department appointed Miss Carolyn Saberg, a social worker, to check out the availability of such programs for the retarded.

Irwin Bier, a parent and board member of the Benevolent Society, said the group then was told there were no funds coming from the Mental Hygiene Department to pay for camp activities.

"We gave them the green light to go ahead and secure the places," Bier said, "and we spent approximately \$3,500, and had board approval to spend another \$6,500."

And then, as in fairy tales with happy endings, a strange thing happened.

The Benevolent Society "found" a pot of gold — about \$250,000, in fact — hiding in the pages of Willowbrook's financial ledgers.

Jerry Gavin, president of the volunteer fundraising organization, Jerry Isaacs, financial secretary, and Mr. Bier said the fund was discovered somewhat surreptitiously, and that it represented an accumulation of patient resources, private and public contributions and profits from the school's community store.

"We spoke to a representative of the Department of Mental Hygiene," Mr. Bier said, "to release \$20,000 of those funds for camp."

That was done, and additionally, the Willowbrook administration reimbursed the Benevolent Society for its initial lay-out of \$3,500.