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Teen Ranch celebrates 50 years in 2017

By Brian Lockhart

Sprawled over 150 acres in Caledon, it is the result of a dream come true, inspired by a man who had some of the best days of his life at summer camp.

Teen Ranch is now celebrating its 50th year and has grown from a single old farmhouse on the property to a year-round facility with a dining room (instead of the term dining hall), visitor accommodations, and an Olympic-sized arena called the Ice Corral.

?Our first summer camp was held in 1967,? Teen Ranch founder Mel Stevens said. ?We looked at 65 properties all over the place, from Kentucky to Muskoka and Sarnia and Kingtson, but we kept coming back to this place.?

The location, he thought, was perfect with its wide open space, wood lots and access to larger centres in the region. Although money was tight and the landowner at the time was skeptical, Stevens told him, ?If God wants us to have your property here, we'll have it.?

The idea for actually starting a camp here began on another continent.

Stevens travelled to Australia with his band at the time, and they became quite a popular group, appearing in shows, radio and television.

?We were a gospel group, but very a different type of gospel group from what the ordinary was at the time. We were quite progressive.?

While in Australia the group promoted the idea of creating a year-round youth camp. Stevens became the director of the camp and stayed on for another five years after the other band members had returned home.

?We arrived home with $10 and 11 suitcases,? he said of returning to Canada.

Stevens was inspired to start a camp through his own positive experience as a youth.

?I guess it goes back to when I was a kid,? he said. ?I went to camp every year from the time I was nine to 19, either as a camper or staff member. I went to the Salvation Army music camp for six years ? a beautiful camp in the Adirondack mountains for three years ? and a waterfront camp in Muskoka. The camp had a more profound influence on me than anything else other than my parents, in developing me as a person. The staff became the example. They walked their talk. It's a Christian camp. Church didn't have as great an impact on me as the staff of various camps I went to.?

Since that opening summer in 1967, Teen Ranch has grown to a multi-use, year-round facility with church groups, school boards and hockey organizations becoming a part of the ranch's existence.

Many international and professional hockey clubs come to the Ranch because of the large Olympic-size ice surface and comfortable accommodations.

A ranch from the beginning, there are now about 50 horses on the premises.

?We run six shows every summer for the community,? Stevens said. ?They're very popular. We have a variety of camp programs, from English and western riding to hockey camps, soccer and BMX direct camps. We also have adventure camps were kids stay here but go off to do mountain biking, caving, or white water canoeing. The Catholic School board in Toronto books about 26 weeks a year where they send Grade 7 and 8 students for a retreat.?

After half a century, Teen Ranch is looking to the future while banking on the success of those who have spent time there over the past 50 years.



Teen Ranch founder Mel Stevens stands in front of the Coach House residence at the camp's property on Highway 10 in Caledon. The Ranch is currently celebrating its 50th anniversary of operation.Photo by Brian Lockhart