From the Outside Looking In...

A Memorable Lesson at Summer Camp!

By Angela R. Green
Communications Specialist, Pioneer Electric Cooperative, Inc.

It all started fifteen years ago as a simple day camp for local students, but now the annual Natural Resources Youth Camp is one of the most highly anticipated events of the summer in Butler County.

Thirty boys and girls from all over the county are nominated by their schools and selected to spend three days and two nights at the camp that's held free of charge at the Mussel Creek Hunting Club, a rustic cabin on private property in north Butler County. The camp is a mix of indoor and outdoor activities where the students learn everything about the forest environment and how it relates to Alabama's economy, as well as how it relates to our everyday lives.

Paul Hudgins, Butler County Work Unit Manager/Forester with the Alabama Forestry Commission and Chairperson for the Forestry Planning Committee, has been a part of the program since the beginning. He said that not only has the camp grown, but the involvement from the community has spread. "The Butler County Forestry Planning Committee, in partnership with more than 20 individuals and companies, fund and organize this camp every summer," according to Hudgins. "Each year is different, but the course stays the same. It gets better every year," he added.

For the past six years, Pioneer Electric Cooperative has played a small role in the day's events, providing demonstrations on power line safety. As a direct result of that involvement, Pioneer's Vice President of Engineering and Operations, Jason Settle, is on the planning committee and takes part in the actual camp. As the Communications Specialist for Pioneer Electric, I got a chance to go along on this journey (for part of the way) to cover what the camp was all about.

From the moment I arrived at the camp on Day Two, I was welcomed by the staff – not to mention campers – that wanted to make sure I got the full experience of spending the entire time there! One of the first campers I met was 12-year-old Paige Campbell who said even though she's used to the outdoors, this camp is still a new experience. "I really like the hands-on learning, having someone

show me instead of reading about all of these things was easier for me. It was worth being away from my phone and computer this summer," she said.

The group had already spent the previous day learning field exercises that included a smoke trailer demonstration, put on by the Greenville Fire Department, and a power line demonstration by Pioneer Electric's Phillip Baker. The campers also took part in lessons that taught trapping, tree identification, Indian artifacts, water safety, and hunting ethics . . . and that was only the first day!

The highlight of Day Two (I was told), was a showing of live creatures that most Alabamians should be familiar with: salamanders, snakes, and frogs. This part of the day was called "A Cooperative Environment," put on by Jimmy and Sierra Stiles from PowerSouth. The duo kept the crowd captivated with their presentation, educating the campers on how to identify poisonous details before they let the campers handle the live critters! Pine snakes, king snakes, salamanders, and tree frogs were just of few of the day's visitors. I certainly didn't expect to become a part of that demonstration! [Check out picture at right]

The rest of the day was spent in the creek with a water quality activity and some simple play time. For R. L. Austin Elementary student Wallonzo Whipple, swimming in the creek was the highlight of his time at the camp. "It was crazy! The water was dirty and we saw fish right there with us," he said.

Later on, the campers prepped for lessons on firearms handling and safety to get them ready for the next day of shooting skeet, black powder, and 22s, as well as archery.

I was only supposed to visit the camp for a couple of hours to write a simple story on Pioneer's involvement, but it was too late . . . I was hooked and had to come back for the final day. Besides, the kids (and staff) had challenged me to a day of competition – never mind the fact that I had never shot a gun before. That day, I must say I was impressed with the sportsmanship of these campers. For many of the students, it was their first time shooting or pulling a bow also. Greenville Middle School 7th grader Talia Lewis said that's definitely the case with her, but she was excited to learn. In her own words she said, "My mind is on the fact that today is our last day here."

Tommy Atkins is retired from the Department of Conservation, but still dedicates his time to the camp every year, teaching kids how to shoot black powder guns. He says the time he puts in is worth the effort, "I would rather children get experience in an environment like this, instead of experimenting on their own after finding a gun in their homes." He also added, "I've seen kids have so little self-confidence when they first come to these camps, but once they get involved in the activities, their faces come to life." Atkins said he plans on taking part in the camp as long as he's physically able.

The camp has proven to do exactly what organizers set out to accomplish. Hudgins said, "So many kids have a one-sided perception of forestry and wildlife. We want to be able to show them through positive role models that men and women can work in various roles in forestry." He went on to say, "These campers are our future and they will affect the policies and procedures of forestry in Alabama in the years to come."

*Although the students seemed quite sure of it, Angela Green questioned whether or not reptiles were **really** the highlight of Day Two!*

As 12-year-old Greenville Middle School student D-Raylen McGrew explained, "I think it's really good that other people in the community love that children are getting educated at this camp and make it possible for us to be here for free." He added, "I want to be three things when I grow up – either a teacher, a doctor, or a lawyer – but this camp has shown me that I can go out of my comfort zone to experience different things."

I, for one, know that I've learned a lot in the days I spent at the camp. I feel as if I bonded with everyone, and I had a chance to talk to several kids about how they felt being away from video games and the internet for three days, in comparison to what they will take away from this experience. One 12-year-old camper, Cailyn Thompson, summed it up best, "It's a really great experience, especially if you don't know a lot about natural resources. This is great and for everyone that made it possible, thanks a million times and keep doing it because we appreciate it."

The Butler County Forestry Planning Committee would like to express their appreciation to the various companies, corporations, and individuals for their financial support of this camp including the Butler County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Alabama Forests Forever Education Grant ("Stewardship" license plate) committee.