In 1956, Joe Bransby, General Secretary of the Long Beach YMCA; Larry Brown, a Y’s Man from the Lakewood branch; Harry J. Moore, a Long Beach Unified School District Principal and the person for whom the Moore League is named; Charles Z. Walker, Sr., the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the YMCA of Long Beach and an attorney for the Farmers and Merchant’s Bank; and Joe Bransby, who was General Secretary of the Long Beach YMCA, hiked from Big Bear to the area of the present camp in response to an ad placed in the newspapers by Mrs. Mark Rhoades to sell the property she and her husband had homesteaded. At that time, there was no highway 38. The Rhoades property includes the land occupied by the present day Adirondack cabins, the dining hall, the nurse’s cottage, Combs Lodge, and the original Rhoades homestead, presently occupied by Brad, our cook, and his family and the barn. The Rhoades family agreed to sell the property for $10,000. The Optimist Club of Long Beach donated the swimming pool.

Max Durham, who was on the staff of the Long Beach Harbor Department and a certified Civil Engineer, Joe Bransby, the YMCA CEO, and Al McCall, who was on staff at the original downtown YMCA went up to the Rhoades property to survey the land for the title transfer.

The land was purchased in 1957 from a $100,000 grant given by Roscoe Oakes and his wife, Margaret. Mr. Oakes was an oil executive in San Francisco. Mr. Oakes was a friend of Frende Combs a Long Beach oil executive. The Combs family donated the lodge that bears their name. The property was purchased for $10,000. It took time to clear the title and collect the money. Then they started the building program. Paul Williamson was a young Long Beach architect who did all the work without charge. He designed the layout of the camp. He did such a good job that plans of the cabins, nurses’ cottage, the dining hall, and other buildings were put into a packet and distributed by the National Council of the YMCA as a model for camp buildings. The swimming pool was built with a donation from the Long Beach Optimist Club.

The next two years were spent in building the Adirondack cabins, the dining hall, the pool, and Combs lodge. They were ready to open camp the Saturday after the 4th of July in 1958. That was Saturday, July 7, 1958. The San Francisco Foundation, which administers the Oakes philanthropies, was approached again and they provided funding for the summer-winter Dorms 1 through 6, which were then built along with the three unit cabins.

Clair Johnson became the CEO of the Long Beach YMCA in 1962, or as they called the position then, the General Secretary. Prior to 1964, Camp Oakes was run by the Boys Department of the Downtown Long Beach YMCA. The Board of Directors of the Association was the only board.
There were no branch boards. In 1964, Clair brought in the concept of a metropolitan association with separated boards for each branch. Clair had difficulty sometimes locating the Camp Director. “When they said he was up at camp, he was in town; and when they said he was in town, he was up at camp. We used to kid about that. So I asked the board to make camp a separate operating unit with a full-time camp executive: that’s when we started going places!”

A second piece of property became available in 1965. This was the homesteaded property of Paul Fisher which consisted of 110 acres beginning at the corral and extended west about 3/4 mile beyond the gate. The Fisher homestead cabin still exists at camp and it is a unique building because it has no studs. There is a 4 by 4 in each corner with a top plate nailed to it. The walls are nailed to the floor and the top plate and the roof rests on this structure.

Paul Mc Claughry, who was then Chairman of the YMCA Metropolitan Board, Charles Z. Walker, Sr., and Clair Johnson went up to meet with Mr. Fisher in Mentone. Paul, Charles, and Clair talked ahead of time and said that if they were to offer $11,000, Mr. Fisher was probably going to ask for $25,000. But in the process of the conversation Clair got the feeling that Mr. Fisher was very anxious to sell the property to the YMCA because he would like the kids to have this area, as well as the original access to the camp. If that property wasn’t purchased, the camp would not have had access to the Rhoades property. That would have completely tied the camp in without access to Highway 38. Clair had the feeling that he wanted to get $5,000 immediately, and Paul Mc Claughry, who was a very good accountant, said to Paul Fisher that he wouldn’t have to pay any capital gains on homesteaded property. We agreed on a price of $15,000 and to pay $5,000 down and $1,000 a year for ten years without interest. Paul Mc Claughry said “how are we going to do it, because we don’t have any money” and Clair Johnson said “well, you’re going to give him a check for $100.” And Paul said “where are we going to get the other $4900,” and Clair said “I don’t know, but we’re going to get it! We’re going to get it from the old timers, and the people from the Kamp Kole group. And so we proposed that we would pay $5,000 within 30 days, and a thousand dollars per year so we got it for $15,000.”

“So Paul wrote a check and gave it to him, and then we got in the car and went over to Redlands to complete the entire transaction, deposit the money in the bank, and transfer title. And then suddenly Paul realized that he had committed himself for $15,000 and he didn’t have any board authorization and he didn’t have the $15,000.” Clair contacted a group of men and believe it or not, he got 48 $100 contributions and 2 $50.00 contributions to make the $4900 down payment. The original Fisher property came with a proviso that the YMCA was to allow Miss Albright, a dear friend of the Fishers, to use the cabin whenever she wanted. Bruce Kerr became the camp chairman and he was the one who conceived the lake. Everybody said that lake could not be built; the porosity of the soil would not permit any water to be put in there, so in 1967, Bruce went out and got a tractor from Shell Oil Company and they did all the excavation. After the excavation, he put a sheet of plastic in the bottom of the lake bed and Kerr Lake was born.
Bruce negotiated the sale of the property beyond the gate for $40,000, so the $15,000 Fisher balance was paid off and the rest of the money was put into the buildings.

Among the early executives were Al Holliday, Clifton Watkins, and Larry Gray. Brian Bost was hired and went to work on June 1, 1971 and ran the camp for the following 16 years. Under Brian’s management, Camp Oakes changed from a summer camp to a year around camp. Schools came to camp for outdoor education, Ranger Camping was introduced, and Easter Seals came up to camp. Paul Andresen came aboard in January of 1988 and remained in control through the summer of 1997. We had just two executives during a twenty-six year period, which helped the camp to become stable. Marty Chandler became the new Executive Director of Camp Oakes beginning January 5, 1998.

In 1968, a group of Kamp Kolers headed by Dave Burcham and John Hanna had the idea that there should be something that carried the spirit of Kamp Kole which was a real part of people’s lives, to camp Oakes. So the idea of the Kamp Kole Chapel was conceived. Money was raised from Kamp Kolers and others to build a chapel and a group of men took two, 2 1/2 ton trucks up to the area above Pasadena, drove down past Camp Hi Hill (the old Opid’s Camp) and picked up the rocks from the old Stone Cabin that had been washed down the old Kamp Kole site after the flood and the fire had destroyed that camp. The two trucks were loaded with these rocks and taken up to Camp Oakes. The rocks were unloaded and just sat there for four years while Clair went back to South America. When Clair returned, somebody said “do something Clair,” so Clair went out and started a campaign and raised enough money to build the chapel and to maintain an endowment to keep it up.

In 1978, Bob Felder became the CEO of the YMCA of Greater Long Beach. Bob came to us from the Los Angeles Metropolitan Association where he had considerable camping experience. During Bob’s tenure, the summer Ranger Program was born and the Easter Seals Society of the Inland Empire came up to camp. Both of these groups continue to arrive at camp each summer. Michael McGinnis, our program director, has been in charge of the Ranger program, and Cathy Saliba, has directed the Easter Seal week at camp for the past few years.

Another long time group that has used Camp Oakes is the Riverside Telescope Makers Conference which is held each Memorial Day weekend. RTMC has been coming to camp for over twenty years and it is one of the largest amateur astronomy conferences in the country. When there is a new moon, there are campers tucked into every cranny at camp. They have purchased a shipping container which is stored at Camp Oakes, and every year, they change the dining hall into darkened theater.

Before the chapel was built, that area was the junk yard of camp. Old beds, mattresses, and other cast offs were thrown there. The only reason that they hadn’t used that area was that it was the only area of camp that wasn’t level enough to have program on it. The slope of the hill exactly matches the gradient that the seats are on now. The slope ended at a drop off and the three tallest trees in camp are right there. When you enter chapel under the wooden arch, you
History of Camp Oakes continued

see the only view in camp that looks out clear across the desert to the mountains beyond. So the garbage place of camp became the jewel of camp. The rocks at the entrance came from the two trucks that hauled them up the mountain from Kamp Kole above Pasadena. The Chapel was dedicated in 1983.

In 1973, the camp manager’s home, now occupied by Gordon Feely was built. In 1978, Gordon Feely became the resident camp manager. In 1979, the bathrooms were added to the dining hall and winter Dorm 7 was built. In 1983, the kitchen area in the dining hall was expanded and remodeled. This was a major undertaking by Scott Petersen.

Also in 1983, the restrooms of the three unit cabins were rebuilt. This work was begun by Scott Petersen and Gordon Feely until the Observatory was begun. Scott and Gordon built the observatory while a contractor was hired to complete the restroom modernization. The observatory was funded by monies raised by Brian Bost and by Mrs. Charles Walker and it was dedicated to Charles Walker in 1983. In 1988, Scott Petersen built Dorm 8 and Rider.

In 1989, the swimming pool was rebuilt. The old pool was broken up and taken out of the ground and a new one was put in its place. The total cost of this new pool was $60,000 and was provided by two grants. Camp Oakes received $30,000 from the San Francisco Foundation and another $30,000 from McDonell Douglas.

Bob Felder retired in 1988 and Rig Riggins became the new CEO of the YMCA of Greater Long Beach beginning in January 1989.

In the early 1990’s the rifle range was relocated to its present site from the canyon. A new archery range was constructed, and a new Ragger’s Point was built. Camp Oakes received a grant from the Ronald McDonald Foundation through the generous efforts of Ron Piazza to build the new high ropes course that was dedicated during our first Camp Reunion in October of 1995. Ground was broken during our Third Camp Reunion in October of 1997 for the rebuilding project of Combs Lodge. We hope to have the first phase of this project completed by the summer of 1998.

In the fall of 1996, new bunk beds were constructed by the Parent–Child Programs of all the YMCA’s in Long Beach. This effort was coordinated by Frank Bader, who was serving as the Chairman of the Board of the Los Altos YMCA; Tim McCoy, the Long Beach Metropolitan Coordinator of the Parent–Child programs; and Jody Alstadt, who spend considerable time putting the bunks together.