

100 Summers: Camp Stella Maris – 1926 to 2026

Sidebar: The Legend of John Beckerman

By Armando Toppi

Introduction

For more than fifty years, Armando Toppi has been one of the great keepers of Camp Stella Maris traditions. Generations of campers know him as a counselor, friend, mentor, and, above all, a master storyteller.

Around the campfire or in the cabin just after lights out, Armando has shared the stories that give Stella Maris its living memory—stories passed from one generation of campers to the next.

Many of the legends that circulate at camp today have been carried forward because Armando took the time to tell them.

One of those stories is the Legend of John Beckerman. Like many great camp stories, it lives somewhere between history and legend—part remembrance, part mystery, and part reminder of the spirit that watches over Stella Maris.

What is your favorite story from Armando?

The Legend

Back in the mid-1950s—around 1955, as the story goes—Camp Director Father Joseph D’Aurizio was struggling to fill one critical role before the start of summer. The camp needed someone qualified to run the waterfront and keep the camp safe on Conesus Lake.

One afternoon, Father D’Aurizio was visiting old friends, John and Mary Beckerman, who mentioned their son, also named John. He was living in California, working as a lifeguard, and WSI-certified.

“If he’s home for the summer,” Father D’Aurizio said, “send him to me. We could use him at Stella Maris.”

And so John Beckerman came to Stella Maris.

He arrived in early June—tall and calm in a way that made others listen. The younger campers adored him. He never raised his voice, never hurried, and always seemed to know when someone was uneasy before they said a word.

The flags flew from the tower on the docks—his signal system:

A green flag meant all clear—swimming and sailing open.

A yellow flag meant caution—winds building, stay close to shore.

A red flag meant only one thing: everyone out, right now.

Anyone who has spent any time on Conesus Lake knows how quickly storms can descend onto its waters from the north. The sunlight dulls, the air cools, and the surface turns restless with small whitecaps.

One afternoon that summer, a storm hit faster than anyone could have imagined. The yellow flag barely had time to rise before Beckerman replaced it with red.

“Everybody in!” he shouted.

Campers turned their boats toward shore as the wind howled. But far out near McPherson Point, two boys in a rowboat were still fighting the waves.

Without a second thought, Beckerman grabbed another rowboat and pushed off.

The storm crashed hard. Rain stung the water, thunder rolled across the lake, and within minutes the shoreline disappeared behind sheets of rain.

When the storm finally broke, the lake was strangely quiet.

The two boys were found washed up on the far shore, soaked and crying but alive. The rowboat Beckerman had taken was found overturned near some reeds by the shore.

John Beckerman was gone.

Searchers combed the lake for days. No trace was ever found. Father D’Aurizio led a Mass for him at St. Jude’s Chapel, and the camp carried on.

But the story did not fade.

Counselors began whispering about footsteps on the dock long after lights out. The red flag—lowered carefully each evening—would sometimes be found raised again by morning. Some swore they saw ripples spread across the lake even when the air was still.

Years later, Armando Toppi was paddling one of the great war canoes—the same ones that now hang in Peggy’s Café—when a motorboat came around McPherson Point, throwing a heavy wake.

“Paddle!” he yelled.

But the wave hit broadside. The canoe flipped, and in seconds everyone was in the water.

Armando fought to surface, disoriented and gasping. At the time, he did not yet know how to swim, and he struggled desperately to reach the overturned canoe.

Then, suddenly, a calm came over him.

In that moment, he felt as though strong hands were lifting him from below, holding him steady in the water until the rescue boat arrived.

When they finally pulled him in, one counselor stared.

“Armando, look at your sides,” he said.

On his back were faint, symmetrical marks—the outline of hands, as though someone had lifted him from the depths.

That night, as Armando told the story, the cabin fell silent. Then one camper whispered what everyone was already thinking:

“Beckerman was watching over you.”

Later, when Armando told Joe Morsch what had happened, Joe simply smiled—as if he already knew the story and exactly who John Beckerman was.

Since then, the legend has lived on.

They say that when thunder rolls across the lake, it’s Beckerman checking the ropes. When a nervous camper hesitates at the end of the dock, it’s his steady voice saying, “You’re safe. I’ve got you.”

The message of the story, Armando always reminds campers, is not meant to frighten them. Quite the opposite.

John Beckerman, he says, is the guardian of the Stella Maris waterfront. As long as Camp Stella Maris stands on the shores of Conesus Lake, campers and counselors will always be safe—because Beckerman will be watching over them.

And every few years, when campers get into trouble out on the lake, a counselor-looking figure seems to appear from nowhere—tall, blond, and calm—guiding them safely back to shore. They thank him, shaken but grateful, and later can never quite describe who it was.

Because, of course, they assume it's just a counselor or member of the waterfront staff helping them in.

And maybe it is.

Or maybe it's John Beckerman, still keeping watch over the waters of Stella Maris.