

METHODIST CAMPMEETINGS AND CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

Editor's Introduction: The American campmeeting experience roughly divides into three periods. Prior to the 1860's, campmeetings were informal and extremely emotional. Held in unimproved groves belonging to sympathetic landowners, they were promoted, often under threat of mockery and persecution, by those determined to carry the full gospel to empty people. The pressures of the Civil War, the fact that many men and preachers were away in the armies, and -- especially in southern Pennsylvania and other areas that experienced military activity first-hand -- concerns about the safety of travel and public gatherings, necessitated suspending such meetings.

Following the war, Americans revived the campmeeting in an attempt to recapture the religious fervor and uncomplicated lifestyles of "the good old days." These gatherings were usually held at sites specifically purchased for such use and equipped with semi-permanent structures and conveniences. Because people were trying to put the excesses of war behind them and live more civilly and orderly, the meetings of this intermediate period tended to lack the bluntness and emotion of the earlier gatherings; they were more like normal religious services, only extended in duration and held outdoors.

Finally, in the 1880's and 90's, the meetings began to cater to the whole person -- body, mind and spirit. The sites sported complete facilities -- cottages, tabernacles, boarding houses, commissaries and post offices. Campmeetings became resorts, political and cultural speeches competed with religious exhortations, and financial profits for the stockholders became as important a consideration as spiritual benefits for the masses.

Not all campmeetings passed through all stages, and active campmeetings in each of the above categories still exist in central Pennsylvania. The series of campmeeting articles in volume IV of THE CHRONICLE leads the reader through these stages of development and provides a chronology of Methodist campmeetings in Central Pennsylvania.

Earl Kerstetter (1913-1968) was born near Mandata, Northumberland County. A graduate of Dickinson College and Drew Theological Seminary, he served forty years in the Methodist ministry and was the conference archivist at the

time of his death. His article, **The Glorious Camp Meetings of the Nineteenth Century**, concentrates on the more primitive campmeeting of the first, or pre-Civil War, period.

Lester Welliver (1896-1973) was born in Hazleton. He, too, graduated from Dickinson College and Drew Theological Seminary. Spanning almost fifty years, his active years in the Methodist ministry included several pastorates, two terms as district superintendent, twelve years as President of Westminster (Maryland) Theological Seminary, President of the Judicial Council of the Methodist Church, and research editor of The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury. His paper, **Camp Meetings and the Central Pennsylvania Conference**, centers on the development of district-sponsored camps during the second, or post-Civil War, period.

Craig Newton, formerly Professor of History at Bloomsburg University and presently serving the Windsor Emmanuel Church, contributes the cover story for volume IV of THE CHRONICLE. **Up at Mountain Grove (1872-1901)** is a well-researched and carefully documented paper on one particular campmeeting of the third period. A considerably shortened version of this paper, titled "Of Piety and Pleasure: The Mountain Grove Campmeeting," appeared in 1985 in Pennsylvania Heritage magazine. We are delighted that Professor Newton has selected THE CHRONICLE in which to present the complete document.

Charles Berkheimer (1896-1968) was born in Mechanicsburg, graduated from Dickinson College in 1918 and was received on trial by the Central Pennsylvania Conference that same year. He served the church as pastor, district superintendent, and on various boards and agencies. Upon retiring in 1962, he volunteered to act as Conference Historian and Librarian. His reorganizing and classifying the Conference's historical material laid the foundation for its present archives, and the Methodist Collection there has been named in his honor. His article, **Two Anecdotes on Heckling**, is one of about fifty such papers he wrote and/or presented that are on file at the archives. It brings the articles on campmeetings full cycle by returning to the meetings of the first period and provides a fitting conclusion to the entire series.

While each of the articles in the series discusses only the Methodist Episcopal denomination, the Evangelical and United Brethren branches of United Methodism were most certainly not without their campmeetings. The following paragraphs complete the present Central Pennsylvania Conference's romance with the campmeeting by relating some of the latter two denominations' experiences on the subject.

The diaries of Christian Newcomer and other United Brethren pioneers refer to love feasts, extended sacramental gatherings and campmeetings. In 1815, the Pennsylvania Conference established a campmeeting that ran for many years at Rocky Springs, north of Chambersburg. Following the Civil War, the meetings were continued on ground a few miles to the west that was eventually purchased in 1872 and turned into Mount Zion Camp Ground. By the time the meetings ceased in 1903, the grounds boasted 82 two-story cottages and other buildings.

It was campmeetings begun by the York Spring United Brethren Circuit in 1852 that led to the 1876 formation of the Mount Olivet Camp Meeting, still operating south of Dillsburg. Penn Grove, located in southern York County near Hanover and whose buildings now stand in ruin, was begun by the United Brethren as a stockholding company in 1897. In fact, Holdcraft's 1939 History of the Pennsylvania Conference lists 13 relatively enduring United Brethren campmeetings that operated within the conference.

Within the present conference territory east of the Susquehanna River, campmeetings operated by East Pennsylvania Conference of the United Brethren Church included ones at Stoverdale, which was founded in 1866 and whose buildings are still standing, Geyer's (or Hillsdale, as it was also known), which operated until 1917, and Lykens Valley. The latter, which was the outgrowth of informal meetings begun in the area as early as 1849, formally opened at its present site in 1894 and still operates a full campmeeting program.

The Evangelical Association sponsored, near New Berlin in 1810, an assembly credited with being the first German campmeeting in America. In 1832, Spangler's Camp Meeting in Centre County's Brush Valley began an Evangelical influence that developed that region into one of the strongest in the denomination. Originally founded by the Evangelical Church, the Island Grove Camp Meeting near Mexico, in Juniata County, continues to hold annual meetings.

Best known of the Evangelical campgrounds was Central Oak Heights. In 1894, the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Evangelical Church began an annual Bible Conference held at various Methodist, United Brethren and Evangelical local camp grounds. In 1909, Central Oak Heights was purchased and fitted with buildings as a permanent site for those meetings. One of the last such camps to be established, Central Oak Heights was typically referred to by the more modern term "Bible Conference" ground instead of "Campmeeting." Later, and until very recently, the site also housed conference summer camping programs for children and youth.

The Central Pennsylvania Conference Archives at Lycoming College contain information, photographs, original programs and record books, and other assorted memorabilia from many of the campmeetings mentioned above and in the series of articles that follows. This is especially true for the post Civil War campmeetings that owned their own land and were governed by chartered associations. Most of the earlier campmeetings were held on borrowed ground, did not erect permanent buildings and kept no written records. Even though some of them continued for decades, little of their stories has been preserved for posterity.

The Methodist's Dunlap Campmeeting Ground is a striking example of this phenomenon. Located in Cumberland County between Mechanicsburg and Lisburn, it operated from 1820 until the uncertainties of the Civil War forced its closing in 1862. Secular histories note the campmeeting as a significant force in the community. When an association tried to erect permanent structures and revive the meetings after the War, there were legal difficulties that involved the lower courts, an 1871 Act of Legislature and an 1875 State Supreme Court Decision.

Although one post-Civil War campmeeting was held, in the 1890's, the vision the association had was not to be realized. The few buildings that had been constructed were dismantled, the trustees personally absorbed all debts, and there was an effort to turn the property over to the Children's Home. Problems prevailed, however, and it wasn't until 1984 that the Conference Board of Trustees finally took action to terminate the church's legal interest in the twenty acre site.

Despite its long and interesting history, this particular campmeeting is not mentioned by -- and seems to be unknown to -- Kerstetter, Welliver, Berkheimer and other Methodist historians. Like literally dozens of such spiritually vibrant meetings across the conference that peaked before the Civil War, the Dunlap Campmeeting simply left no written documentation of its more significant days.

The records that do exist, however, are nicely presented in this current volume, and THE CHRONICLE is pleased to present its 1993 series of articles on **Methodist Campmeetings and Central Pennsylvania.**