

UP AT MOUNTAIN GROVE (1872-1901)

by
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Scrub and sump holes mark the location today, but a century ago at Mountain Grove the varied sounds of campmeeting rolled across the valley each August. Beginning in 1872, thousands of people came to this tiny place in Black Creek Township, Luzerne County, only a few hundred feet from the Columbia County line. They sought recreation and religion under the auspices of the Danville District of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Many, especially between 1875 and 1890, remained the entire week-to-ten-days duration of the meeting. More arrived on Saturday and returned home Sunday evening or Monday morning, depending on travel arrangements permitted by the managers of the meeting. Concessionaires and Chautauqua lecturers, friends visiting and preachers exhorting, happy children released from chores and solemn leaders of prayer, young people shyly courting and families at picnic, by their collective voices and movements weaved a tapestry of joy and dignity into a rustic warp. For thirty years they recreated the scene. Then, in 1901, following the conclusion of the meeting, The Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association, which owned and operated the site, abandoned the undertaking. Within eighteen months it disposed of its properties, and nature began to reclaim the land.

Although Mountain Grove is only a local chapter in the nationwide story of Methodism and the campmeeting, and in its broader outline may be familiar to those who have studied Protestantism during the nineteenth century -- or who have ever attended permanent campmeetings still active -- there is a purpose beyond poignancy and nostalgia for recalling its short life span. Its birth, its vibrant years, and its collapse mirrored local folks' attitudes and habits and recorded for the future a level of change in the closing quarter century of the 1800's central to the dynamic life of northcentral Pennsylvania.

The Mountain Grove operation exemplified what Charles A. Johnson in the 1950's designated the "new-fashioned campmeeting."¹ By 1850 religious organizers, the majority from the West, had prepared manuals standardizing

campmeetings. The number of these manuals multiplied during the following twenty years, each denomination and sect, so it would seem, intent on stimulating a profusion of meetings everywhere in America by means of careful instruction on how to conduct them. They relegated to chance nothing that could be structured, from laying out the site to selecting the march-around hymn to conclude the final day's service. Moreover, they exhibited an almost unvaried sameness in the guidelines set forth. Visiting one meeting was much like visiting any other. The variant factors, over and beyond the liturgical preferences of a given Protestant body, consisted of the people expected to attend -- their particular social milieu and attitudes -- and the weather. The manuals even addressed these subjects in general terms, remarking on the frequent necessity of hiring campground police to enforce the proper spiritual ambience, erecting fences to protect those within from the baleful influences outside the grounds, screening admissions, and building permanent wooden structures for sleeping, eating and conducting religious services.

From the West, the campmeeting movement headed East. Especially after the Civil War, the rural boroughs and villages of Pennsylvania (and other states) wanted the campmeeting, invited it, and needed it. Reasons of religion predominated, at least initially. Old family farmers and villagers required a renewal of a comfortable evangelical faith, in tone and visible form expressive of the regeneration of a deeply felt piety -- itself the consequence of the sobering relief these folk felt following a misunderstood and vicious war made both more perplexing and sadder by the assassination of Lincoln and the sometimes ruthless machinations of public figures. The revitalization of religion offered them a way to live within a current history, the mainstream of which troubled them deeply. Little understanding current events, and certainly not in control of them, they cared nonetheless intensely about the moral and ethical meaning of the present. The campmeeting provided a forum for the vigorous expression of a pride in faith essential to their concern and confidence.

Social and recreational needs shortly came to parallel religious requirements. They did not, however, always complement faith. At the end of the war, America relaxed. Current problems, even if troubling, posed no immediate mortal danger but seemed instead the most unfortunate and hopefully temporary byproducts of a surging national progress. The people of the small towns and countrysides allowed themselves to feel they had earned by their perseverance the opportunity for formalized periods of rest away from home and the job. By the turn of the 1870's,

"getting away" for a vacation became popular in rural areas throughout the East. The return of peacetime prosperity, the growing number of leisure-making inventions, and the pell-mell expansion of transportation provided the moderately affluent and many not as wealthy with the opportunity to enjoy wholesome recreation and constructive play. Travel to a convenient distant point became easier, faster, less of a threat to the family budget, and in short order, a signet of middle class standing.

For many, and in particular the most affluent and fashionable, the vacation was apt to be a completely secular affair. They found it easier than others to accept the challenges and doubts of the present, being protected against relentless changes by virtue of their wealth and local standing. They also seemed to be more secure in their faith and content with worship as they had always practiced it. To these people, a constantly growing number of spas and resorts beckoned. Typical of the majority, and most notable among those which sprang up in the region between the West and North branches of the Susquehanna River in the 1870's, 80's and 90's was Eagles Mere in Sullivan County. It opened as a vacation spot in the seventies, expanded rapidly during the next decade, welcomed a railroad to its doorstep in 1892, and by the close of the century boasted of between 2500 and 3000 summer residents in addition to an unrecorded number of more transient guests.²

While Eagles Mere and other luxurious communities attracted the well-to-do, some who could afford the expense but chose otherwise for personal reasons, and those with more limited financial resources, selected from other recreational opportunities. Among these in the 1870's and 80's, the campmeeting became the most popular. Its regulated blend of play and piety, within the invisible perimeters of common tenets of faith and similar social circumstances, and at moderate cost, attracted thousands and thousands every year to a summer revival of soul and body. In Columbia County and the area immediately adjacent to it, with a population less than 40,000 in 1880, at least six and at times ten campmeetings convened annually during the eighties.³ Attendance is impossible to gauge accurately since the occasional reports given in generalized, and perhaps inflated, numbers in the newspapers must be suspect. Moreover, many people attended more than one meeting during the year. But it may be guessed that upward of twenty percent -- and the figure could even be higher -- of the population of this relatively small area vacationed at campmeeting. Mountain Grove was one of the three drawing the largest crowds.⁴

Reverend S. Barnes, at the time Presiding Elder of the Danville District, reported to the Central Pennsylvania Conference on the opening of Mountain Grove in 1872 that it was the intention of the managers "to make it, perhaps, the best adapted and most attractive resort of its kind in all our Conference territory."⁵ For some time, the Conference had been urging districts to encourage and sponsor campmeetings. In the Danville District, they were sponsored initially by individual churches and circuits. Mostly hit-or-miss affairs conducted outdoors in nearby wooded groves, scheduled irregularly, capable of drawing only from a small population, and at the mercy of the weather, they failed to satisfy the ambition of the Conference. Consequently, between the summer of 1871 and the spring of 1872, five lay and four pastoral leaders within the District agreed to establish and support a permanent meeting at Mountain Grove.⁶

The selection of the location owed to several considerations. Mountain Grove lay near the geographic center of the approximately 1000 square miles bisected by the North Branch, with Bloomsburg its most nearly central town, which comprised the District. Bloomsburg is only seventeen miles by road west of Mountain Grove, and Hazleton, a larger city and an anthracite mining community, is the same distance to the east. The land available there satisfied the requirements of a permanent campmeeting. And so in June of 1872, Danville businessman G.M. Shoop purchased twenty-eight acres with the announced intention of transferring them to a campmeeting association specifically organized to manage the affair.⁷ Adequate roads led into Mountain Grove from three directions. The Danville, Hazleton and Wilkes-Barre Railroad, leased to the Pennsylvania Railroad, passed within a few yards of the property. Just a few years earlier the railroad had constructed a station adjacent to what would become the main entrance to the grounds.⁸ The site lay more than a thousand feet above sea level, in a wooded grove protected to its immediate west by Macauley Mountain from the frequently strong and sometimes stormy west winds. (Only once was poor weather to seriously affect attendance -- in infamous 1889 -- whereas other area meetings often suffered from storms.) According to newspaper editor James C. Brown, the pleasant bucolic setting made the campmeeting "one of the most delightful resorts in Pennsylvania."⁹

Furthermore, there were no man-made distractions. The village of Mountain Grove, until recently known as Wolfton, had a population in 1880 of sixty-five, with only one store, adjacent to and across the tracks of the D.H. & W.B. from the meeting site. A hotel next to the railroad station and

a shoemaker working out of his residence comprised the other businesses in the village. While Black Creek Township in the 1870's and 80's underwent transformation from primarily a farming economy to predominantly a mining one, and the population increased approximately 100% during the former decade and another 116% during the latter, such change scarcely touched Mountain Grove.¹⁰ It remained tiny and agricultural. Surely no other place in the District could have been more conducive in 1872 to an August regeneration of faith and relaxation of the body.

The decision made to establish the meeting, the nine man committee resolved the formation of the Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association in June 1872. It was a joint stock company, reporting capital stock in the amount of \$14,000 in 1873, the year it received its charter from the state legislature.¹¹ Apparently the stock sold rapidly, with Shoop doubtlessly a major shareholder in return for the twenty-eight acres he had purchased. A wealthy lumberman and real estate investor, he served as association secretary and manager of the campgrounds throughout the 1870's. Others prominent in the association included: Presiding Elder Barnes, its first president; Reverend S. Creighton, pastor of St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church in Danville; A.J. Ammerman, Danville businessman-investor who in 1869 had won election as the borough Burgess; B.G. Welch, association secretary-treasurer and general manager of Danville's Glendower Iron Works; E.M. Wardin, association vice-president and editor of The Columbia County Republican until 1875; and Mordecai W. Jackson, founder and co-proprietor of the Jackson & Woodin Manufacturing Company in Berwick. By the early 1880's, E.W.M. Low, prosperous merchant and operator of the limestone quarry in Columbia County, and his neighbor Z.T. Fowler, a feed and grain dealer, played conspicuous roles in the association, as did Lloyd T. Sharpless, the son of a wealthy manufacturer and himself a capable businessman and a member of the Bloomsburg Town Council.¹² The financial and social standing of the leaders of the association contributed to the prospects of success for the meeting at Mountain Grove.

The association had to hurry to clear the land and erect permanent structures in time for the opening of the grounds on August 14, 1872. In less than two months it completed seventy crude, rather small wooden cottages, called tents, each housing four families, and a roofed platform with benches under the trees for the audience, designated as the auditorium.¹³ Although serviceable, these hastily erected buildings underwent alteration prior to the 1873 meeting.

The "Annual Circular of the Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association, 1873" announces that, "*Having profited by experience and observation at other campmeetings we have improved our tents in several important features. First, they are larger, being 9 x 18 feet. Second, they have shingled comb roofs making the second story full height. Third, having stairways, front and rear, the second story tents are in some respects preferable to those on the first floor.*" Inside each tent the management placed a table, several chairs and four bunks hinged to the walls -- for which it furnished straw "at moderate cost." Boarding facilities became available at \$7.00 for the term of the meeting, or \$1.00 per day, or 50¢ per meal.¹⁴ Outdoor fireplaces encouraged picnics, and the association allocated rental space for those who desired to camp out. Also during the first year, president Barnes and the Board of Managers purchased the hotel and three additional acres in order to prevent the sale of alcoholic beverages "within two miles of the grounds" as authorized by the charter.¹⁵ They had no quarrel with former owner George W. Klase, however, who remained on as proprietor for many years.

The effect of the 1873 improvements is conjectural. Elder Barnes in his report to the Conference on the meeting that year called it "religiously, a great success."¹⁶ This suggests that attendance did not reach his expectations, nor did income equal the cost of improvements. Prior to the 1874 meeting, the association increased the number of tents to nearly two hundred, erected a boarding house with sleeping quarters above the dining hall, and built a "pleasant and commodious tabernacle" across the grounds from the auditorium.¹⁷ Heavy snows the following winter damaged the boarding house, but local carpenters repaired it during the early summer. In 1875, an estimated 2500 people camped at Mountain Grove and enjoyed "a very pleasant time," while in 1876, according to Presiding Elder N.S. Buckingham, those in attendance crowded the grounds and brought to the association the satisfaction of saving many souls and earning a profit.¹⁸

Reports to the Conference in 1880, 1881, 1883 and 1889 reiterated Elder Buckingham's conclusion, and newspaper accounts suggest that meetings in other years between 1878 and 1890 were also successful. The matter of souls aside, the dollar return encouraged the association in 1881 to dedicate all profits to improvements of grounds and construction of a new, more ornate tabernacle.¹⁹ Two years later, it enlarged the boarding house; in 1885, it repaired and repainted buildings and replaced water pipes.²⁰ In 1887, the association constructed the showpiece of the grounds, the Main Office. A two-story structure, it

measured twenty-six by sixty feet and stood near the entrance to the meeting. The first floor contained the general administrative office, "two waiting rooms for ladies and gentlemen respectively" and sleeping rooms furnished with carpets, spring beds and mattresses. On the second floor were additional bedrooms, similarly furnished, reserved for distinguished guests. A wide veranda surrounded the building, and a covered passageway connected it with the boarding house.²¹ In 1889, and again three years later, the managers "improved the grounds" and increased the number of tents to 240.²² By expanding and maintaining facilities, the association hoped to attract many thousands annually to the meeting.

Saturday attendance at Mountain Grove, according to The Columbia County Republican of August 18, 1878, reached between four and five thousand; although subsequent figures for other years are not available, the number apparently increased during the 1880's. In 1881, the management informed the newspaper that it had rented nearly all of the tents by the first Thursday of the meeting. On Saturday morning, a train from Hazleton arrived "bringing an immense load of living freight" for the weekend, and "a special train from Hazleton and Danville arrived later in the evening swelling the immense crowd to overflowing."²³ The 1883 meeting, the same newspaper reported, was the "most successful session in its history," while Presiding Elder M.L. Ganoë in both 1888 and 1889 remarked that the grounds had been filled to capacity during the meetings of each preceding year.²⁴ Reverend John Donahue, Presiding Elder from 1889 to 1893, claimed that Mountain Grove "is one of the most popular mountain resorts for religious service in Northern Pennsylvania."²⁵

Elder Donahue's observation seems to have been accurate to the point of understatement. Mountain Grove became in the eighties something of a local institution for a number of reasons, in addition to the current popularity of resort vacations in a Christian atmosphere. The determination and ability of the association to provide attractive facilities contributed, as did its success in maintaining order and serving well the separate considerations of religious service and relaxation. Editor Brown, who attended the meeting in 1881, as he had done for the three preceding years, observed, "The promenading which formerly seemed a source of annoyance to those engaged in worship, is not so frequently engaged in, in consequence of the vigilance of the police and managers..."²⁶ Occasionally, however, discipline faltered. During that same year, "a general stampede" to the depot followed the arrival of the Saturday morning train. And according to

stories retold nearly a century later in the village of Mountain Grove, a still operating in the woods on Macauley Mountain provided a few miscreants with illicit whiskey.²⁷ Such exceptions to the rule of temperate good order as may have occurred from time to time remained, nonetheless, only exceptions. The association kept the Mountain Grove campmeeting faithful to its stated intentions.

In the effort to meet the needs of its guests, within the policies of the Conference and District, the association encountered a potentially serious problem -- one that also caused difficulty and embarrassment for other Methodist campmeetings. The Conference ordered the closing of all campgrounds on Sunday to persons seeking to enter or leave, to be effective starting in the summer of 1879. Danville District Presiding Elder W.W. Evans, a staunch supporter of the rule, conceded concerning the 1878 Mountain Grove meeting that while "there was not more than the average desecration of the Lord's day in travel to and from the grounds," nevertheless, there should be none in order that he and others might enjoy "the holy quiet."²⁸ Although managers of other campmeetings objected to the order -- and several refused to abide by it -- the Mountain Grove managers "at much expense enclosed their grounds and closed their gates on the Lord's day," Elder Evans proudly informed the Conference.²⁹ Each year through 1888, the gates remained closed on the Sabbath. In fact, in 1883 only Mountain Grove held a sanctioned meeting anywhere in the District, since it alone complied with the order. Finally, persistent opposition and perhaps other considerations led to the revocation of the order in 1889.³⁰

The Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association complied with the Sunday closing, without recorded objection, for sound reasons. The decision stemmed in part from what appears to have been a genuine concurrence with Conference sentiment on the part of the meeting managers, and in part from the obligation as a District campmeeting to set a firm example of discipline. The presence of the Presiding Elder on the board of managers, sometimes as its president, had to have a powerful influence on policy. But there was another, and more self-serving, reason -- the ban on Sunday traffic did not hurt attendance. For one thing, the convenience of the railroad and the willingness of the P.R.R. to increase service to Mountain Grove during the term in the meeting made it easy for patrons to reach the grounds at any time prior to the closing and to leave early Monday, if they chose, in time to return home by midday at the latest.

In the beginning, the Hazleton and Catawissa stations on the railroad handled most of the passenger traffic to

Mountain Grove. From 1872 and 1882, one train left Hazleton for Catawissa and returned each day. By 1875, a special train traveled between the two termini three times during meeting week and connected with other passenger lines at each station. In 1878, the special train began daily runs; in 1881, an additional special train departed from Hazleton. In 1883, the P.R.R. added a second regular daily train and dropped the special runs. The following year the railroad returned to the single regular daily run, but it reinstated special campmeeting trains -- two from Catawissa and two from Hazleton.

In 1884, both the P.R.R. and the Philadelphia & Reading Railway began to sell special fare excursion tickets, and the Lehigh Valley Railroad followed suit a year later. The P.R.R. increased its service in 1887 by resuming the twice daily runs from both Catawissa and Hazleton, adding occasional special trains, and operating two and three trips daily from the newly opened Nescopek and Delano branches respectively. By 1889, traffic to Mountain Grove called for a third daily train from Catawissa. Throughout the 1880's, passengers generally could leave the meeting no later than 9 a.m. and be in Catawissa, Bloomsburg, Danville or Hazleton before noon.³¹ The convenience of travel to Mountain Grove certainly contributed to its prosperity during the decade of Sunday closing.

How prosperous was the meeting at Mountain Grove during the decade? In the absence of financial records, or even specific dollar figures mentioned anywhere, only a guess may be ventured. According to the newspapers, individuals and families rented nearly all of the tents available by the date of the opening of the meeting. Each tent rented for \$7.00 until 1878, after which date and until the 1890's the association reduced the rate by one dollar.³² Since the average number of tents available between 1879 and 1890 approached two hundred, it is reasonable to conclude -- if, in fact nearly all were occupied -- that annual tent rentals grossed close to \$1100. Leftover tents, rented for fifty cents a night, probably brought in an additional \$70. The association rented space for individuals to camp out, in 1873 at the price of "30 cents per annum, per foot on the avenues." The boarding house served many thousands of meals, which at the minimum price of \$7.00 per person for tenters on the grounds throughout the session -- even considering that many families prepared their own meals outdoors -- would have grossed an amount greater than that from tent rentals. To assist those who chose to provide for themselves, the managers sold "at reasonable rates" bread, meat, vegetables, groceries and "supplies general." Stable fees, portage for "baggage taken from the depot to the tents

and returned," the sale of straw for the bunks in the tents: these and doubtlessly other nominal charges insinuate that the total income to the association from the tenters exceeded \$2500 every year.³³ Guests for a day or the weekend, apparently in larger number than the tenters, spent considerably less money but patronized the boarding house and the several concession stands at the entrance to the grounds. They may have spent an additional \$1500 at the meeting. In an era when it costs less than \$60 to erect a tent and but one dollar a day to feed the average American family, the income from the meeting yielded a profit to the association that complemented its other reasons for adhering to the Conference order to close the gates on Sunday.³⁴

The success of the association in renting the great majority of the tents for the entire term of the meeting, and in keeping the dining hall busy at mealtime, derived in no small measure from the social standing of certain families who came year after year. Unlike other area campmeetings which attracted patrons from the immediate neighborhood -- lifelong friends, relatives and coreligionists who resided within a short distance by horse and buggy from the grounds -- the Mountain Grove meeting by its conception as a District event could depend on only a general religious identity as a common denominator.³⁵ With so many rival meetings, some of them Methodist and closer to the homes of the faithful, and thereby more convenient, the Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association from the outset could not rely on the neighborhood or personal friendship to make the meeting a success. Instead, it appealed effectively to a number of middle class families prominent in their home towns who, by their community stature, made the meeting as "respectable" as it was relaxing and spiritually refreshing. Others followed them to Mountain Grove because the meeting was an estimable place to vacation. In fact, many who attended were not even Methodists.³⁶

Since the Bloomsburg newspapers printed much information on the campmeeting in the 1880's and mentioned many names of those present, it is possible to arrive at a sense of the social composition of that town's relatively small but influential group of prominent citizens whose presence at the meeting did so much to make it a prosperous affair throughout the decade. (It may be added that more fragmentary information compiled from the Danville newspapers support the impressions drawn from the Bloomsburg press.) That these prestigious families served as magnets, as it were, to bring others to the meeting is conjecture based on traditional American social attitudes and patterns.

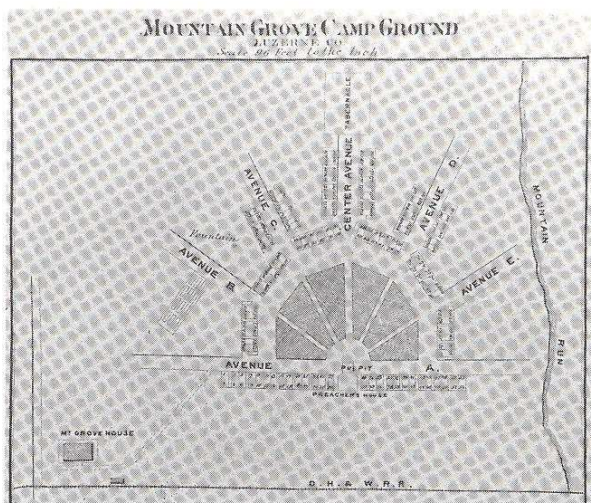
Among those from Bloomsburg who tented at Mountain Grove prior to 1890 for not fewer than three years were: James C. Brown, civil engineer, railroad investor, trustee of the town's Methodist Church, editor of The Columbia County Republican after 1874, and chairman of the county Republican Party at the turn of the 1880's; K.C. Kent, politically prominent son of an old and honored town family, and the owner of valuable properties; Caleb Barton, descendant from one of the town's founding families, one of the twenty wealthiest men in Bloomsburg, and a pillar of Republican politics; Isaiah W. Hartman, for over fifty years a leading local merchant who established his retail clothing and general merchandise store in 1848 and whose "reminiscences" the Bloomsburg Daily would publish between 1893 and 1901; Lucas N. Moyer, partner in the prosperous and regionally well-respected Moyer Brothers Drug Company, the largest non-industrial business in Bloomsburg at the time; Jerry Saltzer, moderately well-to-do dealer in musical instruments, and a man visibly active in church and civic affairs; Lloyd T. Sharpless, mentioned previously as an association stockholder and member of its Board of Managers; and C.C. Peacock, an influential lawyer with wide-ranging business interests.

To these eight names may be added seventeen others who attained a generally equivalent social standing in Bloomsburg. These twenty-five families in 1880 stood high among the town leaders in business, political and professional life. All of them except Saltzer had achieved a financial position in or quite near the upper twenty percent in total taxable assets. The newspapers during the decade repeatedly mentioned their social comings and goings, and the 1887 History of Columbia and Montour Counties contains biographical information on eleven of them.³⁷ If not the elite in town, they stood merely a step away. Their attendance at Mountain Grove significantly helped to foster the idea among others in town that the meeting offered close to the best available (to them) in religion, recreation and respectability.

Social and recreational opportunities influenced a great many to go to Mountain Grove, and no doubt predominated among some. Nevertheless, religious activities were the pulse of the campmeeting, the chief attraction and the justification for enjoying a vacation of restful sociability. Drawing on the unpaid services of Methodist ministers from within the District, the managers of the association provided a continuous program of services for persons of all ages.

At 7:30 p.m. Wednesday night, a bell on the grounds called worshippers to the auditorium for a sermon of welcome. Beginning Thursday and continuing through Saturday, the daily schedule called for an 8:30 a.m. period of prayer, a sermon at 10:30, a children's service at 1:30 p.m., another sermon at 3:30, a second prayer period at 6:30, and a sermon often delivered by a minister invited from outside the District to conclude the day at 7:30. On Sunday, an "experience meeting" began the day at 8:20 a.m., followed by services at 10:30 and 1:30 p.m. At 3:00 a distinguished visitor offered a sermon after which, at 7:30, the session's most featured guest minister delivered what Brown called in 1881 an "old-time sermon in which all were delighted."³⁸ The next Monday through Wednesday the weekday schedule continued, with the ministrations of the Eucharist on Tuesday. Then, on the second Thursday at 12:30 p.m., a final exhortation in which many ministers participated closed the campmeeting. At its conclusion, all joined hands, formed a line and marched around the auditorium singing "Marching to Zion."³⁹

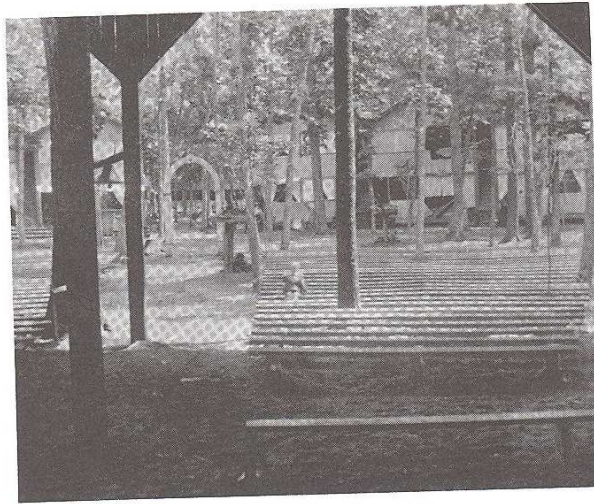
By the mid 1880's, the association added other religious and/or parareligious attractions. It introduced Chautauqua Day on the first Thursday of meeting in 1885. These educational and moral lectures were held at the tabernacle and presided over by such contemporary Methodist luminaries as Dr. Lyman Abbot, in 1886. Because they instantly became so popular and competitive with the regular religious program, the Board of Managers two years later moved them back to the Tuesday prior to the formal opening of the meeting; in 1889, the first Wednesday became Chautauqua Day.⁴⁰ In 1891, the association opened the grounds for thirteen days. Activities, always in the tabernacle, began on a Thursday with a temperance day, followed by Chautauqua Day, a missionary day, Epworth League Day and Sunday School Day on the following Monday; regular religious events then commenced Tuesday in the auditorium and concluded eight days later.⁴¹



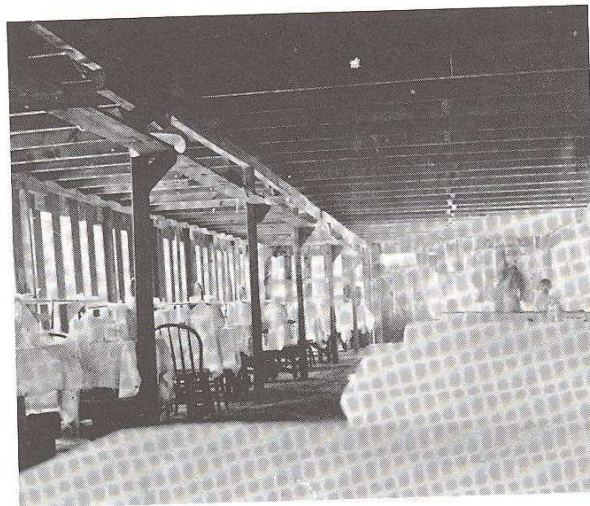
The plan of Mountain Grove Camp Ground as it appeared in the 1876 atlas of Columbia and Montour Counties.



A row of the rustic cottages, called "tents," which held four families each.



The view from inside the main preaching pavilion looking out toward the encircling cottages.



The main dining hall, prepared to receive those who chose to purchase their meals from the Association.

Despite the addition of special days, the ample and well maintained facilities, distinguished clerical and lay speakers, easy access by railroad, a splendid location and consistently good weather, and despite or regardless of the reopening of the gates on Sunday in 1889, attendance fell off sharply in 1891.⁴² It seems that the association had anticipated the drop. Notwithstanding the observation by Elder Donahue the preceding March that the 1890 attendance had matched that of years before, secretary John R. Rote took an uncommon step, one unused by the Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association since the middle of the seventies -- he inserted an extended announcement in The Columbia County Republican. The July 9, 1891, advertisement was one half page long and one column wide, lengthier by far than the customary twenty-five to forty word announcements and obviously intended to create interest in the forthcoming meeting. Rote announced the new thirteen day program of events and emphasized that Mountain Grove was a resort, easily accessible to nearly everyone, which boasted the latest and best accommodations for guests and visitors. His advertisement failed in its purpose. Attendance declined even further in 1892.⁴³

Presiding Elder E.H. Yocum reported that the 1893 campmeeting "was fairly attended," but scarcely acknowledged it in his next two yearly reports. While he omitted mention of Mountain Grove altogether in his report for 1896, he referred to the 1897 meeting as one of "spiritual profit." His successor, the Rev. W.W. Evans who had staunchly endorsed Sunday closing of the gates during his earlier term as presiding elder, sounded more optimistic notes, although he did not urge a return to the Sunday restrictions. He claimed that the 1898 meeting had been "well attended," that the one in 1899 provided "rest and recreation" for "our people in attendance," and that the 1900 event had been "interesting and profitable." even though less successful than the circuit-sponsored meeting at Patterson Grove. The next year, Elder Evans mentioned the convening of the Mountain Grove meeting but omitted the fact that already the association had decided to close the grounds permanently.⁴⁵

The association had recognized the impending decline of the Mountain Grove meeting by the turn of the 1890's, and

had attempted to ward off its ultimate collapse throughout the decade. Rote's 1891 advertisement may have been the initial attempt, for at nearly the same time, and on occasions thereafter, the Board of Managers agreed to open the grounds in advance of the meeting for special events. The Bloomsburg Methodist Church, for example, arranged for a special eleven car train to transport picnickers and a band to Mountain Grove for a private outing. By the middle of the decade, the association was inviting guests to bring their own furniture and housewares, rent as many tents as they wished at a group rate, and spend from one to two weeks on the grounds as if they were vacationing at spas like the then fashionable and popular Ganoga Lake, in Sullivan County not far from Eagles Mere.⁴⁶ To accommodate freight cars carrying personal household items, the P.R.R. even constructed a short spur from the depot at Mountain Grove onto the grounds. The railroad also announced that it would ship baggage free to the meeting and began to sell round trip fares at "new reduced" rates of seventy-five cents for adults and thirty-five cents for children boarding in Bloomsburg.⁴⁷

These inducements encouraged relaxation and promoted Mountain Grove as a resort more than as a religious experience. The latter, of course, would have been clearly understood by Methodists of the Danville District, but the association minimized religion in its public announcements of the nineties. Only in 1896 and 1900 did it specifically mention the spiritual activities and give names of "eminent divines" who would be at the auditorium during the meeting, and in neither instance did the announcements contain much detail.⁴⁸ A stranger in the area, reading this paid advertisement in the Bloomsburg Daily of July 30, 1898, could err in his or her expectation of a visit to Mountain Grove: "*Don't miss the Mountain Grove meeting. The grove is beautiful. The water pure and crystal clear, air cool, scenery fine -- an attractive mountain resort.*"

Association policies on the grounds began to complement the secular thrust of the advertising. Management repaired the fences and gates, locking the latter each evening in order to provide guests with privacy -- a practice common at Ganoga Lake and other resorts. It brought in a piano-organ from Hazleton and offered nightly programs of band music or singing groups such as Danville's home talent "*The Swamp Hole Quartette.*" It attempted to improve the quality of food service in the dining hall and, it seems, encouraged a proliferation of concessionaires off as well as on the grounds. The ice cream parlor near the depot and a booth inside the gate at which six inch long popcorn bars two inches thick sold for five cents are

remembered as having been particularly popular. Earlier efforts to preserve "the holy quiet" gave way to promenades and laughter on Sundays. Events at the tabernacle, especially on Chautauqua Day, drew larger audiences than the services in the auditorium. Single young ladies and gentlemen courted more openly than in the past.⁴⁹ The campground police, if in fact still employed by the association, appeared invisible.

But the attempt to provide Mountain Grove with a more secular appeal failed to recapture the popularity of the meeting. Not only attendance but profits also dipped precipitously during most of the decade. Fences repaired earlier went neglected at the end. Gates hung unevenly, their limpness symbolic. The large numbers stenciled in black at the entrance to each unpainted tent, the trees growing in the avenues: these spoke more frankly of conditions than the hopeful light yellow paint on the Main Office. Hawkers and hustlers moved freely across the grounds. Many visitors chose to lodge and board with people living in the village, finding accommodations there more satisfactory and perhaps even less expensive. The dining hall did a brisk business only at dinner time. Many tents remained unrented. The P.R.R. reduced regular service and limited special trains to one a day.⁵⁰ Few freight cars used the spur on the grounds. Memories recall and, where possible, pictures confirm the bleakness of the buildings and, despite the improvement of the auditorium in 1896, the distinctly seedy respectability of the meeting.

The Bartons, Browns, Ents, Hartmans, Moyers, Saltzers and Sharplesses no longer tented. Of the twenty-five prominent families in attendance during the 1880's, only the Peacocks apparently went regularly to Mountain Grove by the close of the nineties.⁵¹ The substantial middle class of Bloomsburg vacationed in more prestigious, generally farther distant resorts, or in private camps. The general return of prosperity nationwide and locally by the turn of the 1890's led to a rapid multiplication of vacation spots east and west -- in Michigan and Illinois, along the New Jersey shore, and throughout Pennsylvania.⁵² Many offered occasional religious events or services; most of them reflected the current public confidence which underlay its turning away from campmeetings. Small towns as well as urban centers preferred "low rate" and "cheap" excursions to Niagara Falls or Atlantic City; from Bloomsburg, the cost of travel on the P.R.R. was \$7.50 and \$4.50 respectively for a round trip.⁵³ For those who chose to remain closer to home the railroad provided special trains to Eagles Mere (and about 400 people boarded in Bloomsburg for there on July 19, 1894). Local patriotic and fraternal organizations

sponsored outings at dozens of recently opened groves and picnic grounds, and clubs or groups of friends constructed private hideaways bearing such honest names as Camp Idyl, Camp Idleness or Hobo Cozy, all a few miles out of town.⁵⁴ The campmeeting had fallen from favor with these former important visitors to Mountain Grove, a fact perceived by Elder Donahue as early as 1891 when he informed the Central Pennsylvania Conference that the meeting "was not so well attended as in other years, when cheap excursions to Ocean Grove and other seaside and mountain resorts, which are now opened up, were unknown."⁵⁵

The families from Bloomsburg who continued to attend the Mountain Grove Meeting, and those whose names merited the attention of the Bloomsburg Daily, represented a less prestigious and less monied segment of the town's middle class. Among them were more employees than employers, a considerable number of unchaperoned single women and men, and nearly twelve who "Sundayed" or visited for but a few days for every one who tented at the meeting. They came to relax, to play, to court, to enjoy the music -- in short, to have the best vacation that personal circumstances allowed.⁵⁶ The Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association sought to cater to this new clientele, but the fact that they operated a District meeting which the church could not permit to become merely another resort, coupled with the greater convenience of local picnic grounds and hideaways, doomed the effort to failure.

By 1898 the meeting at Mountain Grove faced a precarious future. The association admitted as much to the public in a report printed in the Bloomsburg Daily on August 11, although it couched its difficulties in the most positive and optimistic language possible: "*Contrary to report the season has been a fairly prosperous one. Secretary W.R. Owens says: It is spiritually away ahead of previous years. In the number of tents we rented we are about up to last year's status, while in transient trade we lead last year's receipts by a safe margin. The management is not in debt and never has been and the history of this year's record will balance for next year.*"

While the association may well have had sufficient operating funds for the 1899 event, it found after that year's meeting that it had no position of strength equivalent to 1898. Attendance dropped precipitously in 1899 and the secretary conceded that the Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association had seriously suffered financially.⁵⁷

As a result, the Board of Managers decided to make a special effort in 1900 to reverse the decline of the past

decade. When warm weather arrived, it spruced up the grounds and constructed a new building, Preacher's Home, immediately to the rear of the auditorium. The purpose for the latter seems clear in light of an announcement that management would provide free lodging for ministers in attendance: to appeal to them to vacation at Mountain Grove and thereby to serve as examples to the more devout in their congregations to join them and tent at the meeting. Toward this goal the association launched an ambitious advertising campaign in the Bloomsburg Daily and perhaps other newspapers, with the prediction that "Great interest has been aroused in the meeting this year and it is expected that there will be a large attendance." Two days later it inserted the announcement that a swelling number of Americans are forsaking vacations at seashore and mountain resorts to return to campmeetings.⁵⁸

Unfortunately, neither the appeal to ministers nor the claim of the revival of interest in campmeetings worked as hoped, a fact recognized before the 1900 meeting even opened. In what appears to have been a last minute change of tactic, in an item printed on the day the meeting convened, the association returned to its more familiar emphasis on rest and recreation. The statement reminded readers that management had "materially improved" the grounds and added that many Bloomsburg families (names provided) had come expressly to get away from the stale air and heat of town.⁵⁹ During the following week a correspondent-spokesman who signed his articles "STYLUS" reported at length on the non-religious features of Mountain Grove. In the first communication he remarked that the tents were now more comfortable and attractive than in past years, describing them as "*cozy little homes, furnished and adorned with the tastes and desires of the occupants... showy rugs hanging over the window sills, surmounted with jardinieres filled with golden rod or other rustic bouquets... Everything that can be done is done for the comfort and convenience of tenters and visitors.*"⁶⁰

But everything failed. Only on Saturday did a "crowd" attend, admitted STYLUS. Perhaps at the urging of the Board of Managers, James C. Brown, Lucas Moyer, Mrs. K.C. Ent "and other distinguished citizens" spent the day on the grounds. Musical programs highlighted the Saturday program.⁶¹ All was in vain. The Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association once more lost money. Convinced that the meeting had seen its best days, and unable to sustain deficits any longer, the Board of Managers, according to the Conyngham Valley Herald, offered to sell the property to the P.R.R.⁶²

The railroad company rejected the proffer, and the association one more time opened the grounds for campmeeting, perhaps for no other reason than as essentially sentimental desire to complete three decades of service to the District. The 1901 meeting passed quietly, with scarcely an announcement in the press and no report following the last march-around.⁶³ In 1902, the association sold the land to a local farmer and the buildings and furniture to private parties.⁶⁴ By the end of the year only the boardwalk from the depot to the gates remained, already deteriorating as new scrub growth broke through the pine planks.

END NOTES

1. Charles A. Johnson, The Frontier Camp Meeting, Dallas: 1955, 245-252.
2. George Streby, "History of Eagles Mere Borough and Shrewsbury Township...[1905]," in Clara A. Streby Ring, History of Sullivan County, n.p.: n.d.
3. The following campmeetings operated in the area on at least two occasions between 1881 and 1890: Benton, Briar Creek or Evansville (Moyer's Grove), Elysburg, Hobbie, Jackson, Mausdale, Mountain Grove, Patterson Grove, Rupert Grove and Waller (York's Grove).
4. The other two: Patterson Grove, a Methodist circuit meeting in Luzerne County a few miles north of Columbia County; and Rupert Grove, which hosted the African Methodist Episcopal Church district meeting and others.
5. Annual Minutes of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, 1873, Philadelphia: [1873]. Hereafter referred to as Annual Minutes, and the date. The author wishes to thank the late Dr. Loring Priest of the United Methodist Archives, Lycoming College, Williamsport, Pennsylvania, for his invaluable assistance in locating this and other sources used in the preparation of this paper.
6. Names of the committee which established Mountain Grove are mentioned in Marion Storaska, Pioneer Sugarloaf Valley, Mountain Grove: [1970], 19.
7. Ibid.
8. The D.H. & W.B. reorganized in 1878 as the Sunbury, Hazleton & Wilkes-Barre Railroad. The line remained leased to the Pennsylvania Railroad, which operated it as a branch of the Philadelphia and Erie Railroad. H.W. Schotter, The Growth and Development of The Pennsylvania Railroad Company, Philadelphia: 1927, 102,156,183.
9. The Columbia County Republican, 15 July 1886. Twice earlier Brown praised Mountain Grove as a resort. Ibid., 15 August 1878 and 17 July 1882.

10. Black Creek Township, 1880, Census Schedule. Smull's Legislative Hand Book and Manual of the State of Pennsylvania for 1898, Harrisburg: 1899, 330. Ibid. for 1902, Harrisburg: 1903, 291.
11. Storaska, Pioneer Sugarloaf Valley, 19. "Annual Circular of the Mountain Grove Camp Meeting Association, 1873," United Methodist Archives, Lycoming College.
12. "Annual Circular ... 1873." Battle, History of Columbia and Montour Counties, Chicago: 1887, *passim*. Freeze, A History of Columbia County, Bloomsburg: 1883, 188-189. The Columbia County Republican, 18, 25 August 1881; 16 July 1885.
13. Annual Minutes, 1874, 36.
14. "Annual Circular... 1873."
15. Ibid. Annual Minutes, 1874, 36.
16. Annual Minutes, 1874, 36.
17. Annual Minutes, 1875, 38.
18. The Columbia County Republican, 19 August 1875. Annual Minutes, 1877, 49.
19. The Columbia County Republican, 18 August 1881; 27 July 1882.
20. Ibid., 26 July 1883; 16 July 1885.
21. Ibid., 28 April 1887.
22. Annual Minutes, 1889, 63. The Columbia County Republican, 9 July 1891. Storaska, Pioneer Sugarloaf Valley, 19.
23. The Columbia County Republican, 18 August 1881.
24. Ibid., 23 August 1883. Annual Minutes, 1888, 56. Annual Minutes, 1889, 63.
25. Quoted in The Columbia County Republican, 11 July 1889. Doris Wiant Harvey, "Patterson Grove," in Patterson Grove Centennial, 1868-1968, edited by Richard S. Patterson, n.p.: [1968], 7-50, mentions that this meeting drew crowds of between five and ten thousand by the mid to late 1880's.
26. The Columbia County Republican, 25 August 1881. See also his kind words to the management in ibid., 16 August 1877 and Elder Smyser's expression of gratitude at the "absence of unwieldy crowds" in Annual Minutes, 1886, 49.
27. This rumor, and much of the material presented at the end of this paper, has been provided by Mrs. Marion Storaska and Mrs. Florence Rittenhouse, both of Mountain Grove, interviewed by the author several times between the fall of 1978 and the summer of 1979.
28. Annual Minutes, 1879, 39.
29. Annual Minutes, 1880, 35. The managers of Patterson Grove objected strenuously and refused to comply on occasions. Harvey, "Patterson Grove," 13.
30. Annual Minutes, 1884, 42. Annual Minutes, 1890, 65.
31. Railroad schedules and policies are found in The Columbia County Republican, 19 August 1876; 9 August 1877; 25 August 1881; 2 August 1883; 17 July 1884; 16 July 1885; 15 July 1886; 21 July 1887; 1 August 1889 and in the Bloomsburg Journal, 16 August 1882.

32. The Columbia County Republican, 22 May 1879. Bloomsburg Daily, 28 July 1898.
33. On charges, see "Annual Circular... 1873."
34. On costs, see The Columbia County Republican, 14 August 1879. W.O. Atwater, "Pecuniary Economy of Food," The New Century Magazine, January 1888, 437-446.
35. Newspapers clearly point out the local focus of other area meetings. Also, see Harvey, "Patterson Grove," Patterson Grove Centennial, *passim*.
36. The prominence of the managers and other association stockholders played a role, as did reports in the press of the names of socially substantial individuals in attendance. Also, the reputations of the visiting clergy and other speakers, and the fact that Mountain Grove was farther distant than locally sponsored campmeetings, contributed. On attendance by others than Methodists, see The Columbia County Republican, 18 August 1878, 11 July 1889.
37. Information on these twenty-five families is gathered from the following sources. Ibid., 16 August 1877; 15 August 1878; 14 August 1879; 2 August 1883; 31 July 1884; 5 August 1886; 8 August 1889. Bloomsburg Daily, 2 August 1892. Bloomsburg, 1880, Census Schedule. Bloomsburg East and Bloomsburg West, 1880-1889, Tax Dockets. Bloomsburg East and Bloomsburg West, 1879, 1882, 1885, Triennials. Battle, History of Columbia and Montour Counties, *passim*.
38. The Columbia County Republican, 18 August 1881.
39. Storaska, Pioneer Sugarloaf Valley, 19.
40. On the Chautauqua Day, see the following. Annual Minutes, 1886, 49. Annual Minutes, 1886, 56. The Columbia County Republican, 20 May 1886; 11 July 1889; 9 July 1891.
41. The Columbia County Republican, 9 July 1891.
42. Annual Minutes, 1891, 48.
43. Annual Minutes, 1893, 55.
44. Annual Minutes, 1894, 61. Annual Minutes, 1898, 58.
45. Annual Minutes, 1899, 51. Annual Minutes, 1900, 78. Annual Minutes, 1901, 66. Annual Minutes, 1902, 78.
46. The Columbia County Republican, 2 July 1891. The bulk of the information for this and the next three paragraphs comes from interviews previously cited. But see also, Bloomsburg Daily, 27-28 July 1898.
47. Bloomsburg Daily, 27 July 1898.
48. Ibid., 9 July 1896; 30 July 1900.
49. Ibid., 13 August 1892; 7 August 1894; 1,9,12 August 1895; 10 August 1896.
50. Ibid., 2 August 1895; 27 July 1896; 27 July 1897; 2 August, 1900.
51. Ibid., 1,12 August 1895 and 8 August 1900 mentions the Peacock family.
52. On vacation resorts as social phenomena, see Edward Hungerford, "Our Summer Migration," The New Century Magazine, August 1891, 569-576.

53. For example, see Bloomsburg Daily, 27 July 1894; 12 August 1895.
54. Summertime issues of ibid. tirelessly report private camp activities.
55. Annual Minutes, 1891, 48. Elder Yocum provides a confirming opinion in Annual Minutes, 1894, 61.
56. Bloomsburg Daily provides persons' names in the issues of 31 July 1894; 3,6-8 August 1894; 1,6,10-11 August 1895; 1,10 August 1896; 4 August 1897; 8,15 August 1900. Tax docket and the 1900 Bloomsburg census schedule supply personal data.
57. In an item headed "Not a Success" in the Bloomsburg Daily, 12 August 1899, the secretary stated, "For some reason or other the meeting this year was not attended with the success that characterized it in former years. There was not the same enthusiasm, and campers from this town were very few..." Comments even more frank appeared after the grounds closed in ibid., 7 August 1902, and the Berwick Enterprise (quoting the Danville News), 23 & 25 July 1900.
58. Bloomsburg Daily, 23 & 25 July 1900.
59. Ibid., 8 August 1900.
60. Ibid., 9 August 1900. The "rugs" were actually quilts brought by renters and displayed in the spirit of friendly competition.
61. Ibid., 13 & 15 August 1900.
62. Ibid., 27 August 1900, reprints the Conyngham Valley Herald news item.
63. Two brief notices appear in the Bloomsburg Daily, 13 & 29 July 1901.
64. Storaska, Pioneer Sugarloaf Valley, 20.