

## THE GLORIOUS CAMP MEETINGS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by  
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The camp meetings of the nineteenth century have received little attention from historians, and we have limited understanding and appreciation of this unique socioreligious institution. Undoubtedly, many of us are the spiritual heirs and/or direct descendants of the clergy and laity whose spiritual birth or rebirth took place at some camp meeting.

The origins of the camp meeting have been obscure. Outdoor religious services among Methodists, with emphasis upon preaching, were started by John Wesley in England in 1739. Such services were also held by various clergy in America during the last years of the eighteenth century. One of the most gifted and influential such preachers holding services outdoors was John Wesley's friend, George Whitefield. He preached to as many as an estimated thirty thousand people at one time. These outdoor gatherings were the forerunners of the organized camp meetings.

One of the earliest camp meetings could have been here in central Pennsylvania. John Heckewelder, a European traveler visiting our state, wrote the following in his journal dated April 21, 1789: "*5 miles from Carlisle we saw a Presbyterian pulpit in the woods. These pulpits are built on a tree in the woods where people camp. A flight of three or four steps lead up to the pulpit, over which a small roof is built.*"

The camp meeting of the nineteenth century came into being on the Kentucky frontier in July of 1800. Along the Gasper River, a Presbyterian preacher named James McGready had held revivals which attracted an increasing number of people. This preacher of vivid speech and fearless courage invited several fellow Presbyterian clergy and a number of Methodist preachers to participate in a sacramental meeting, which was probably the first planned camp meeting in this country.

The emotional intensity and religious experiences at the Gasper River gatherings were hardly surpassed at the

many other camp meetings on the western frontier. Rev. McGready describes one Sunday evening after a particularly vivid sermon by John McGee when the cries of the people grew in volume so as to fill the surrounding woods with ever-increasing sounds. *"No person seemed to wish to go home -- hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody -- eternal things were the vast concern. Here awakening and converting work was to be found in every part of the multitude... Sober professors, who had been communicants for many years, now lying prostrate on the ground, crying out in such language as thus: 'I have been a sober professor: I have been a communicant... O! I see that religion is a sensible thing... I feel the pains of hell in my soul and body! O! how I would have despised any person a few days ago, who would have acted as I am doing now! -- But O! I cannot help it!' Little children, young men and women, and old grey-headed people, persons of every description, white and black, were to be found in every part of the multitude... crying out for mercy in the most extreme distress."*

Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists united in holding camp meetings on the frontier with great success in the number of converts. People came by the thousands on foot, on horseback, by carriage or wagon, to camp for several days, or even three or four weeks. Peter Cartwright, one of the most colorful Methodist preachers on the western frontier, had been converted at one of these union camp meetings in Kentucky in 1801. He was a political opponent at one time of Abraham Lincoln in Illinois. Cartwright tells about being at camp meetings where ten, twenty, sometimes thirty, preachers of different denominations would preach day and night for four or five days. At one camp meeting he heard more than five hundred Christians "all shouting aloud the high praises of God at once."

A common manifestation of extreme emotionalism was the "jerks." The word describes the convulsive movement of the whole body which was expressed by saint and sinner alike, usually occurring after a song or sermon. The more resistance upon the part of the individual to the jerk, the greater the jerking. Cartwright records seeing five hundred jerking at one time. Relief was usually found by arising and dancing or running in the area, although Cartwright recommended fervent prayer as being effective. At one camp meeting in Kentucky a number of drunks arrived to disturb the service, and one particular drunk cursed jerks and all religion before the assembly. Suddenly he had the jerks. He declared he would drink the jerks to death, but he couldn't get the bottle to his mouth. One of his jerks caused him to accidentally break his bottle against a tree.

Again he cursed, as he saw his whiskey soak into the ground. His jerks increased, causing his neck to snap. He fell to the ground and soon died, still bitterly cursing. Cartwright saw jerks as judgment sent from God.

There were other strange and wild exercises at camp meetings on the early frontier -- such as the running, jumping and barking exercises. Other people professed to fall into trances and see visions, sometimes at meetings, sometimes at home. They would lay apparently powerless and motionless for hours or even days without taking food or drink. When they came to, they would prophesy concerning the time for the end of the world. Methodists were generally against such extreme forms of behavior.

The camp meeting on the western frontier became an integral part of American life and culture. The immorality, depravity, drunkenness and baseness prevailing on the frontier gave way to high morality, admirable spiritual qualities, sobriety and desire for the better things in life, including education, because the camp meetings and revivals changed persons' lives.

What happened on the western frontier during the nineteenth century as a result of camp meetings and revivals also happened in the east. The balance of this paper will be devoted to Methodist camp meetings in and adjacent to central Pennsylvania.

It must be remembered that camp meetings were never an official institution of the Methodist Episcopal Church. They were accepted and adopted by preachers as a means of gaining new converts and revitalizing the spiritual life of church members. Bishop Francis Asbury, the greatest Methodist episcopal leader in the earliest years of the nineteenth century, urged the presiding elders (now, district superintendents) to turn the summer Quarterly Conferences into camp meetings whenever feasible. These meetings were usually two to four days in length. Asbury was convinced of the great spiritual benefits resulting from these outdoor revivals. His enthusiasm was expressed in the statement, "Methodists are all for camp meetings." He was well pleased when preachers reported successful camp meetings. He was, however, strongly opposed to the more fanatical behavior frequently seen and emphasized there should be order at all times.

Asbury reported the first camp meeting in western Pennsylvania was held in 1803 near the Old Fort, not far from Brownsville, on the Monongahela River. He estimated there were four thousand people on the grounds on Sunday.

The next year, 1804, the meetings began there on Friday, August 24th, and continued until the next Tuesday afternoon, day and night, without intermission. Methodist preacher Noah Fidler noted in his journal that there were 34 preachers present, nearly five hundred people received the sacrament of the Holy Communion, sixty-six tents were erected, and as many as 10,000 were present. *"Many were awakened, converted, reclaimed and some sanctified. At certain times nearly 100 were lying on the ground at once. Exhorting, singing, praying, shouting, crying for mercy might be heard at the same time. In short, it was the greatest time that ever I saw."*

The first Methodist camp meeting of record was in Central Pennsylvania was held in the summer of 1805 about two miles below Milton along the Chillisquaque Creek. Flavel Roan of Lewisburg attended two years later and recorded this in his journal dated September 19, 1807: *"Sunday at camp... The moon shining through the trees, the fire, candles in the camp, the large quiet crowd of people, made a scene romantic and solemn. 20th -- Great carrying on at camp. Criswell's boys got happy."*

There are no records to indicate all of the last century's Methodist camp meetings and their locations. We know there was one at Warrior's Mark as early as 1811 and at Sunbury and Danville as early as 1838. We have a description of a small camp meeting, and arrangements for it, which was held near Philipsburg starting September 1, 1826. The committee selected suitable grounds, including a spring of water or a stream, for the campers and others who would be attending. A few weeks prior to the meetings, those planning to attend took teams and tools to clear and prepare the grounds, determining the sufficient size of ground for the tents, seats and preaching stand. The underbrush and fallen trees were removed. Other trees were cut down and laid to support planks for seats. Sleeping quarters were arranged for preachers. An altar rail was placed on four-foot high poles. The altar rail formed an enclosure of about twenty by forty feet, with entrances at the front corners. The enclosure was used for the penitents and mourners during the latter part of the service. The preaching stand accommodated several preachers and was located behind the altar area.

Often saw dust or tan bark was placed down the center aisle and around the altar, thus the old expression of sinners "hitting the saw dust trail." Fire stands or posts were typically placed at appropriate spots around the circle of tents, the posts having logs or slabs on top, plus some ground on which fires of pitch pine burned at night to light

the grounds. Each tenting family usually chose their own spot and erected their tent. If boards were used, about one thousand feet were needed; otherwise, tents were made of muslin or canvas. Families living in tents were expected to provide the meals for the preachers and also to feed strangers, especially on Sunday.

At a camp meeting on the Baltimore Circuit in October of 1806, the colored people were allowed to pitch their tents behind the preaching stand. One preacher who was there describes how guards were used to preserve order. An outer guard was stationed at the gates to the grounds and prevented disorders around the edge of camp. Inner guards seated the people and kept order in that area. Another specific guard brought the penitents and mourners into the pen or altar area, where assistants to the preachers would speak and pray with these seekers. There were also boys, called runners, whose duty it was to whip or drive away dogs, hogs, etc., from the meeting area.

The order of the day at this camp meeting began at dawn with the blowing of trumpets for rising. Twenty minutes later each family was expected to have their prayers at the door of their tent. Then followed breakfast. At 10:00 a.m. there was preaching. Dinner was over by 2:00 p.m. Preaching followed at 3:00 p.m. and again at night. On the last day, after breakfast, the people stood in front of the first row of tents and the preachers knelt at their stand, all in silent prayer to thank God for blessings received at the meetings. Then the preachers went around the camp singing. Five or six trumpets were blown with such fervor as to cause "a tremendous roar." People gathered around the stand, shouting for joy and weeping -- men embracing men and women embracing women -- with parting cries mixed among the continuing singing and shouting.

The aroused emotions and unrestrained expressions of religious fervor -- and what we today would consider undisciplined behavior, bad taste and repulsive fanaticism -- were common not only on the western frontier but also here in our own state. At a pre-Civil War camp meeting near Washington, Pennsylvania, Jacob Gruber noted in his journal that the services continued day and night for three days with very little intermission. He said there was preaching and exhortation, weeping and rejoicing, singing and praying, crying and shouting. Gruber believed in camp meetings; his informal style and direct approach thrived in such settings.

Christians from other lands were sometimes confused and puzzled by this explosive emotionalism. An excellent and very vivid description of a revival service held in

Carlisle in 1840 is given by J.S. Buckingham, Esq., from England, and illustrates what often occurred not only in churches but also on camp grounds. The following paragraphs are his extended observations.

"During our stay at Carlisle there was a great religious Revival among the Methodist body, their large church there having been crowded every night from sunset to midnight, as full as it could hold, for 15 nights in succession, without a single intermission; and such was the fervor which still manifested itself at those meetings, that it was thought they might last for 15 nights more. Never having yet been present at such a meeting in this country, I went on the evening of Tuesday, the 11th of February, about nine o'clock, when the church was full, and the enthusiasm of its occupants at its height. Every seat was filled, the males sitting on one side of the house and the females on the other, while the aisles were as thickly crowded as the pews. It was some time before we could get more than a few feet in from the door; but by patient watching of the opportunities that presented themselves for advancing, we were at length enabled to reach the body of the church.

"The scene which was here presented, it would be difficult to describe; and the sensations with which it inspired me, would be still more difficult to explain. They were a compound of surprise, awe, sorrow, pity and terror. It was like being in an assembly of maniacs. The pulpit was unoccupied, or had been abandoned. The Revival minister -- a young man -- was on a platform underneath the pulpit, with a number of young men and boys, some mere children, nine and ten years of age, on his right and left. He was addressing the audience, calling on them to come out this night or never -- this moment, which might be their last, from the hell in which they already were -- to save themselves from the hell to which they were all rapidly hastening. They were, he said, but a few feet from the very brink of the cataract, over which they would soon be carried into the lake that burns for ever with fire and brimstone.

"He then pointed to the youths on his right and left, as brands saved from the burning, 40 or 50 of these having become converts during the present Revival. On the font bench, before the platform, were young females occupying what is called 'the anxious seat,' most of them in convulsions. And from every part of the upper half of the church, near the platform, were proceeding loud and discordant sounds, amounting almost to yells. At least 20 different persons were all engaged in loud prayer at the same time, some on their knees and some standing, with their arms extended upward, and vociferating at the top of their

voices. The females alternately sobbing and groaning, and the mingling of so many discordant sounds, with the general agitation that seemed to pervade the whole assembly, produced impressions on my own mind which I shall never forget.

"That all the persons engaged in this scene were really sincere, for the moment, I did not then, nor do I now doubt. The leaders appeared to be under the impression that they were doing their duty faithfully, in exciting the terrors of those whom they addressed; and the terrified subjects of their appeals seemed to be duly stricken with horror and affright. This was more apparent in the women and children, some of whom were not more than eight or nine years of age; but even the few elders affected evinced no symptom of insincerity in their groans and cries.

"Admitting all this, however, and granting that many open profligates are by such Revivals drawn from a sinful life and become reformed characters, it is to be apprehended from the falling back of many when the effervescence of this excitement is over that some injury, which counteracts the good effects produced in the first instance, is done to the cause of religion. And, on the whole, these Revivals are not productive of so much permanent benefit to the cause of religion and morality as the more steady and orderly proceedings of religious worship conducted in a more moderate manner.

"As to the exhibitions themselves, however habit may lead the people of America to look upon them with comparative indifference, I must say that they appeared to me most extravagant. I had seen the Howling Dervishes in Turkey, the Faqueers and Pilgrims in India and Arabia, the Santons in Egypt and Syria, the Ranters and Jumpers in England, and the Shakers in America; but among them all, I never witnessed more of convulsive excitement and religious frenzy than at this Methodist Revival in Carlisle, which must leave most campmeetings in the shade."

Not all people in the Christian churches approved the camp meeting as a means of either spiritual renewal or evangelism. Some Presbyterian clergy objected strenuously to the earliest camp meetings in Kentucky. The Presbyterians who favored the movement withdrew to form the Cumberland Presbyterian denomination.

Benjamin H. Latrobe, architect of the capitol at Washington and a descendant of the Philip Antes family (Methodist pioneers in this part of the state), had no enthusiasm for camp meetings. In his journal dated August

8, 1809, at Washington he wrote: *"I have always endeavored to prevent my wife from being led by her curiosity to attend the meetings of the Methodists. With the most rational, but very pious and religious sentiments, she joins a warmth of imagination which might receive a shock if not an impression from the incantations which form the business of their assemblies. A camp meeting, however, is a thing so outrageous in its form and in its practices, that I resolved to go to one held a few miles from Georgetown in Virginia, under the auspices of some very good citizens -- principally of Mr. Henry Foxall, the great iron founder."*

Many mistrusted the practice of families sleeping in the woods. And there was resistance to new expressions of religious feelings. The question of the sincerity of these shouters was discussed about 1870 by some preachers at the Wayne Camp Meeting near Lock Haven. One of them was Francis Hodgson, a prominent Methodist preacher, theologian and author who once served Grace Church in Harrisburg. His testimony was this: *"In the past I have robbed myself of many a blessing because I restrained my feelings; but that day with me is now gone by; I will never curb my emotions again; I will give them free rein. After all, religious joy is the greatest power in the church..."*

Today family camping is becoming more popular than ever. And the emotionalism once expressed at religious services has been channeled into the shouting and screaming and other noises at athletic contests ranging from Little League baseball to professional football.

Despite the sometimes bitter early nineteenth century opposition to camp meetings, Asbury was determined to continue them at all costs. While spending a week in York during July of 1807, he noted in his journal "that the success of our labours, more especially at camp meetings, has roused a spirit of persecution against us -- riots, fines, stripes, perhaps prisons and death, if we do not give up our camp meetings: we shall never abandon them, but shall subdue our enemies by overcoming evil with good..." He recommended the use of guards or watchmen around the camps to keep order. "Let them be the most respectable elders among the laity." They were to carry long, white peeled rods.

Drunks and rowdies frequently tried to break up a camp meeting service. One time Peter Cartwright left the preaching stand to go down into the crowd and subdue a big trouble maker by fighting him. Some got drunk from the whiskey they purchased at stands near the camp grounds. This was such a serious problem in Maryland that the

Methodists persuaded the Maryland Assembly to fix a fine of twenty dollars as the "penalty for erecting booths for selling liquor within two miles of any Methodist camp or quarterly meeting" in Frederick County. In 1816, a maximum fine of one hundred dollars could be levied against any offender in six other counties.

Many people came to camp meetings, especially on Sundays, as a place to go, a place to see their friends, or to be part of the excitement. They disturbed the meetings so much that some camps admitted persons on Sunday only if they had tickets. Camp grounds located along railroad lines, such as the Wayne Camp Meeting, were overrun on Sundays by hundreds of people who came on the trains and were discharged at or near the camp grounds. In the 1870's, some of our presiding elders in the Central Pennsylvania Conference not only recommended the closing of the grounds to outsiders on Sundays, but also refused to attend the meetings if there was no such ban.

Let us take a cursory look at some of the more enduring Methodist camp meetings held in the Central Pennsylvania Conference last century.

One of the two Methodist camp meetings still existing is **Crystal Spring**, located south of Breezewood on the Bedford-Fulton county line. It was started in 1857 and survived through a period of eleven years after 1872 when there were no meetings. In the early years, a few families came with ox teams and/or in covered wagons which they used as sleeping quarters. Most families had canvas or muslin tents, and the meetings were held in a large canvas tabernacle. In fact, the Methodist camp meeting was sometimes called a "Feast of Tabernacles," and the tabernacle designation was commonly applied to the later wooden worship structures.

The **Summit Grove** Camp Meeting was established before the Civil War outside New Freedom, near Shrewsbury, in southern York County along the Northern Central Railway. The grounds, located about two hundred yards from the railroad, possessed good shade, water from wells, and were easily accessible from Baltimore as well as from the environs of York County. Although no longer in Methodist hands, the property continues to operate as a summer camp and Bible Conference.

The **Wayne** Camp Meeting (sometimes called West Branch) was started shortly after the Civil War on land donated by the Hon. James Quiggle of Philadelphia at Wayne station,

located just several miles from Lock Haven along the Pittsburgh and Erie Railroad. The 1869 camp meeting was described by the presiding elder as follows: "...for admirable arrangement of its grounds, the number, comfort and taste of its tents; the completeness of its order; the multitude of quiet and respectful persons in attendance; and the manifested presence and power of God, it was a grand success." In 1872 the crowds were so large and noisy that the camp managers arranged with the railroad company that no trains stop at Wayne station during the 1873 meetings. It was there that Dr. Robert L. Dashiell, president of Dickinson College, preached on Sunday in such an effective and simple way that a plain man came crying to him and said, "If I had a son to send to college, I would send him to Dickinson." And it was at this camp meeting that Methodist historian W. Lee Spottswood saw an "athletic black man locked closely in the loving embrace of a white Methodist preacher." Unfortunately, the flood of 1889 completed destroyed the facilities and they were never rebuilt.

The other still existing Methodist camp meeting is **Patterson Grove**, on the Harveyville Charge in western Luzerne County. A Colonel Headley of New Jersey gave twenty-three acres for a camp ground in 1868. It still has the typical layout of the larger camp grounds -- an open tabernacle or auditorium, wooden cottages around the grounds, a hotel to accommodate overnight any preachers and guests, and a dining room where meals are served three times a day.

The **Juniata Valley** Camp Meeting Association bought land and improvements for \$13,000 in 1872. Located near Newton Hamilton in Mifflin County, the grounds were later formally purchased by the Conference and became the Methodist Training Camp. This was the only such property in which the Annual Conference ever had financial interests and authority, and it was sold in 1958.

The **Mountain Grove** Camp Meeting Association received a charter from the state in 1873. The Association bought a large hotel at the railroad depot located on the border of the grounds and pledged that the hotel would "be run on strictly temperance principles." In addition, a boarding house was located on the grounds. When the new century brought with it changing lifestyles and the decline of the camp meeting, the Association disbanded and sold the land to a local farmer in 1902.

Most of the above camp meetings endured because they had railroad or other connections that allowed them to draw

from a large area and/or they were designated as District Camp Meetings under the supervision of the appropriate presiding elders. Another such camp meeting was at Oakville, in Cumberland County, along the Cumberland Valley Railroad. These were seriously promoted in the closing decades of the last century in place of the small and sometimes poorly organized local, or charge, camp meetings.

Some of the latter such meetings were held at various times at Montoursville, Muncy, Hughesville, Tivoli, Mifflinburg, Jersey Shore, Liberty Valley, Cogan and many other places around the conference. Few of these grounds had adequate provisions for overnight camping or sufficient leadership to sustain camp meetings for more than a few years.

Camp meetings did have their lighter moments, some quite humorous and amusing. At a camp meeting near Warrior's Mark in 1852, one of the preachers named A.M. Barnitz sketched with pencil a group of preachers smoking around a fire over which an iron pot hung. The scene was described as "*...parsons in comical poses, smoking immense cigars which sent forth volumes of smoke; the fire blazing far upward toward the sky; a pot of giant size on the fire, sending forth immense puffs of steam, and its boiling water running over its sides.*" A wife of one preacher, looking at this scene, "laughed merrily." It was on this same charge in an earlier year that the following item appears among the camp meeting expenses: "Whittaker S. Vantries, for two hundred segars [sic] for use of the preachers, fifty cents."

At one of the area camp meetings a preacher with a reputation for being very eloquent got up and started to preach on Sunday afternoon. As one observer noted, he probably failed to impress the people; for while he was preaching, his false teeth flew out of his mouth and onto the top of the preaching stand.

Jacob Gruber, whose unique manner made him the subject of many anecdotes, was involved in several camp meeting incidents. Once, when the horn had been blown for preaching, the people were slow in getting seated. The presiding elder announced that the gentlemen were to take seats on the right and the ladies on the left, a seating arrangement which also prevailed in churches. But the people were so intent on talking to each other that they paid no attention to the elder. Gruber told him that his calling them gentlemen and ladies was meaningless to them and said, "Boys, come right along and take seats here; gals, come along and take seats there." Having said this in a comical way and having delighted the people with his odd manner, Gruber got them to respond at once.

At another camp meeting where the people were slow in getting seated, some of the women were standing on the seats. Gruber then said in a loud voice, "If that young lady standing on the bench knew what a great hole she has in her stocking, she would certainly sit down." Each not knowing who he meant, the women all sat down suddenly.

While the camp meeting began to decline by the time of the Civil War, it would continue to be fruitful into the twentieth century. It not only resulted in the spiritual conversion of thousands but also produced a form and zeal carried over into the church buildings in the fall and winter. These services were known as revivals or, due to their extended length, as protracted meetings. Eugene Hendrix, a future bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the first president of the Federal Council of Churches, was converted at the forerunner of the Summit Grove Camp Meeting. W. Lee Spottswood, a president of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary, was converted at a camp meeting near Carlisle.

Revivals were also held regularly on Methodist campuses during the middle years of the nineteenth century. At Williamsport Dickinson Seminary in 1858, the sixty students converted at special meetings included Edward J. Gray, who later became its revered President. In 1866, some twenty students were converted during such a series of meetings at Dickinson College. Irving Female College and Cumberland Valley College, both of Mechanicsburg, and Cottage Hill College of York reported "revivals of religion" and an "outpouring of the Holy Spirit" which resulted in Christian commitments of as many as half the student body. William Perry Eveland, a former President of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary and later a Methodist missionary bishop, was converted under the preaching of an evangelist in a Methodist church in Philadelphia.

The nineteenth century camp meetings are a thing of the past. There were the fervent sermons, the pressing exhortations, the long prayers, the evangelistic songs, the cries of the penitents, the shouts of the saved, and too often the excesses of emotionalism. But no one can deny the record -- the lives of evil men changed by the tens of thousands, persons becoming decent and law-biding citizens, drunkards becoming sober men, parents raising children in a Christian atmosphere, youth and young men called to be ministers of the Gospel, the Church expanding both in numbers and in total ministry. As Wallace Guy Smeltzer has written, "The Methodist camp meetings were effective instruments of the Holy Spirit in the evangelization of America."

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