

From the Archives: Methodist Camp Meetings and Revival

Rising out of the field preaching of the Wesleys, and combined with the wild ruggedness of the American frontier, circuit riders carried the gospel from place to place in early American history. Preaching in the open air became a regular event for some. By 1801 the Cane Ridge Camp meeting in Cane Ridge, Kentucky propelled the camp meeting movement onto the international scene. By 1820, Methodists were holding around 500 camp meetings a year.¹



Unknown Camp Meeting with Tents

While this has often been viewed as a frontier movement, some argue that it is more historically situated in the Second-Great Awakening, and often in conjunction with Methodist Quarterly Meetings in the mid-Atlantic region.² But whether a frontier movement or a mid-Atlantic Methodist revival, these highly emotional, almost spontaneous events attracted a great deal of attention. Since publicity travelled by word of mouth and travel was often arduous, these religious meetings would last for multiple days and so people often pitched tents to stay for the entire event. In some cases these became annual events at the same locations and people began to build simple, rustic meeting places, often including a tabernacle and cabins. By the 1830's such permanent campgrounds were common, and with them came a more organized and less ecstatic style of worship.



Camp Meeting at Camp Wofowag, near Moodus, Connecticut

In reaction to this “taming” of the Methodist camp meeting, the Holiness Movement created separate camp meetings. By 1867, the first camp meeting focused on the doctrine of holiness was started in Vineland, New Jersey, led by Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson. The National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness emerged out of the success of these meetings. The divisive issue of the holiness teaching would push the Holiness Movement into ultimately forming new denominations and leaving the Methodist Episcopal Church.³



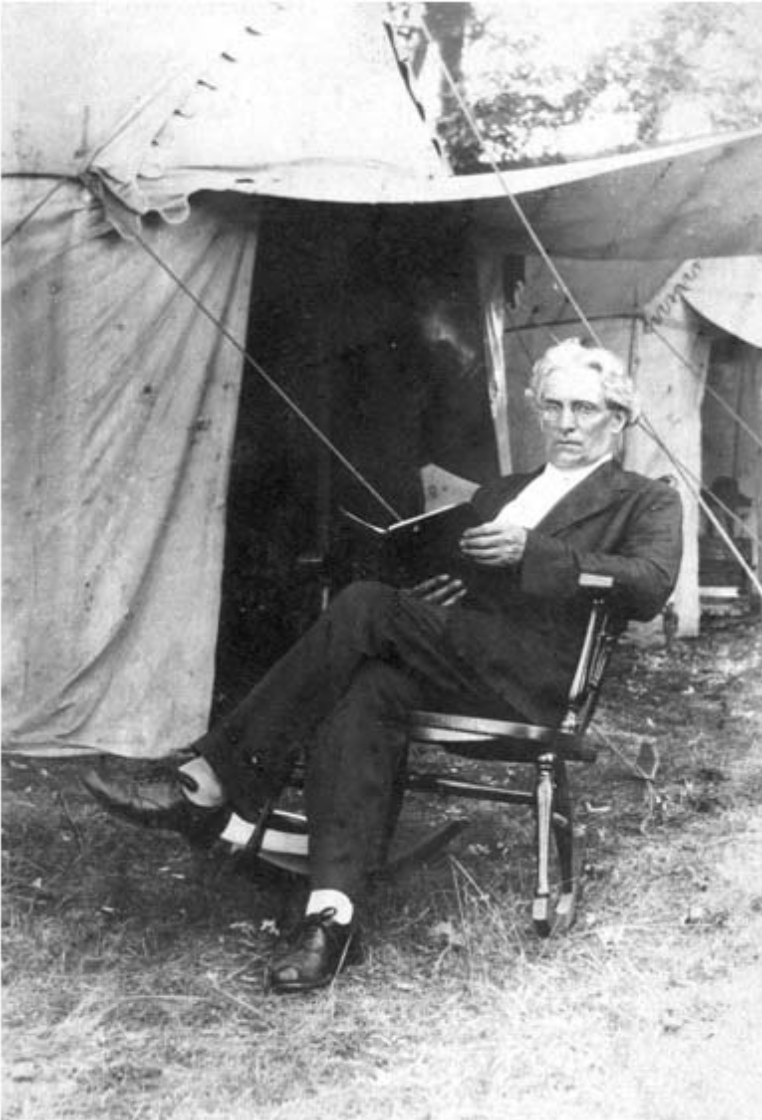
Pasadena Camp Meeting, Pre 1917

As Methodists moved from the ecstatic revivals among the poor and lower classes to become pillars of Victorian society at the height of political prominence, the traditional camp meeting also changed.⁴ Some of these campgrounds would become quite elaborate, such as Wesleyan Grove on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, with its "cottages" adorned with turrets, gingerbread, and other Victorian Gothic finery. Also symbolic of this civilizing of the camp meeting was the campground in Ocean Grove, New Jersey (sometimes called the "Queen of the Victorian Camp Meetings"). Such campgrounds became vacation spots with subdued camp meetings that would hardly be recognized by their frontier predecessors.



Willimantic Camp Meeting with "Cottages", Connecticut in 1910

Asbury Theological Seminary was also connected to the camp meeting movement, especially in the holiness camp meetings that maintained much of the religious fervor of the frontier movement they sought to emulate. Percival Wesche, in his book on the life of Asbury founder, H.C. Morrison, notes, "Throughout most of Morrison's half century of evangelism he was also well known as a camp meeting preacher. He preached in approximately 250 such campaigns. Since this program occupied his time for nearly three months every summer he considered that about one-fourth of each year, or a total of nearly twelve years, was spent in camp meeting work."⁵



Asbury President H.C. Morrison at an Unknown Camp Meeting

While camp meetings are still held today in a number of places, their popularity has declined. They remain however, a reminder of the importance of holiness and a fervent relationship with God that is often missing from churches in the North American context today. History has much to teach us about how revival operates in the church, and equally how human activity can unfortunately quench the work of the Holy Spirit as well.



Asbury President Frank Bateman Stanger Preaching at Redwoods Christian Park Camp Meeting

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but is essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.

End Notes

¹ All photographic images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images.

² Cf. Lester Ruth, "Reconsidering the emergence of the Second Great Awakening and Camp Meetings Among Early Methodists." In *Worship* 75(4): 334-355, 2001.

³ Cf. A. Gregory Schneider, "A Conflict of Associations: The National Camp-Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness Versus the Methodist Episcopal Church." In *Church History* 66(2): 268-283, 1997.

⁴ Cf. Roger Robins, "Vernacular American Landscape: Methodists, Camp Meetings, and Social Respectability." In *Religion and American Culture* 4(2): 165-191.

⁵ From *Henry Clay Morrison "Crusader Saint"*, by Percival A. Wesche. First Fruits Press, Wilmore, KY, 2013, page 224. Accessed electronically at: <http://place.asburyseminary.edu/firstfruitsheritagematerial/24/>