THE CAMPGROUND

The following article was written by Glenn Fish who lived on the campground from 1966 to 1992. His wife was Dorothy Bishop, the daughter of a long time summer resident of the campground.

During the 1870s camp meetings for religious and revival services were very popular and attracted huge throngs of people from near and far where ever held. Usually the location selected for such meetings were woods, and preferably beside a lake or river. Such a camp meeting was held in Pottersville and attracted attendance by a number of the Johnsburg church congregation.

Although the members of the Methodist Church in Johnsburg were favorably impressed by the camp meeting, they desired a meeting location nearer their own village. According to tradition, the *Reverend Aaron Hall*, then pastor at Johnsburg, started out on Monday morning, together with a few parishioners, to search for a level spot he had been told about on the east bank of the Hudson River, downstream from the site of the present bridge. Wading across the river, and heading downstream under the shelter of Campground Mountain, the party soon located a well-wooded area of nearly ten acres on level ground. The members of the party were soon convinced that the area was suitable and Reverend Hall sought out the owner of the property and inquired about possible acquisition of the land. After reporting to the Johnsburg congregation, and receiving it's support, Rev Hall arranged the purchase of the plot from the Carpenter tract and the beginning of the **Riverside Camp Meeting Association** was under way.

Thus, way back in 1873, Reverend Hall led a group of eager able men with oxen and axes, accompanied by wives with food and cooking utensils, to the chosen spot to begin clearing of the land for a "circle" to provide an attractive setting for religious services.

Again, tradition holds that Reverend Hall was the first to sink the bit of his ax into a tree, to initiate the felling of trees and the formation of the "circle". Willing, able hands fell to work, soon the area was cleared, planks were laid from stump to stump, a platform erected for the speakers, and roof provided to house the organ.

In keeping with the ingenuity of the early settlers, "lumberjacks", so called, built of wood boards- resembling a mortar box four or five feet square, one foot deep, and placed on four stout posts four feet high. The "jacks" were lined with cobblestone from the river and covered with sand. Underneath were piled supplies of firewood for use during the services. When the time for evening services drew near, the caretaker lit the fires of pine bark, knots and roots in each of the "jacks", four around the circle and one in the park- to provide illumination of the grounds to discourage the swarms of mosquitoes from disturbing the worshipers. The caretaker found eager hands among the children on the grounds when it became time to replenish the fires, or even extinguish flames when the boards of the jacks began to burn (today's jacks are made of stone and concrete.)

The families who came to the meetings arrived by horse and wagon, with the wagon

loaded with family members, tents for shelter, straw for bedding, and food for both man and beast. Upon arrival, the horses were unhitched from the wagons, tied to the trees all through the grove, tents were pitched, and families at meal time spread blankets and tablecloths upon the ground to serve their needs. Some visitors came only for the day and the conclusion of the meeting was marked by a long line of wagons leaving the grounds as the families wended their ways home. To accommodate the overnight visitors, tent sites were available, a barn was erected to stable the horses (the barn was located just east of the road and just north of the present baseball field), hay was provided for the horses, but owners were required to furnish oats for their animals.

The early informality of the grounds, and the increasing number of people attending the meeting soon required more planning and action by the newly formed camp meeting association. A Preacher's Cottage was built on the river side of the circle, with the first floor open for meditation or fellowship, and the second story an open dormitory with cots. A "Boarding House" was constructed to serve visitors to the grounds for several days who were without overnight accommodations. This building had a kitchen and dining room on the ground floor and sleeping rooms above. This building remains today, was extended on the front, and serves currently as the "Administration Building". When autos had replaced the horses and wagons, the former barn was moved across the road to the riverbank, windows were installed, two floors and partitions were built, and rooms were furnished to enable use as a girl's dormitory. In later years, a heavy snowfall, followed by prolonged rain, collapsed the building. The site is now occupied by the recreation building. With a need for more permanent structures to house the visitors, plots of ground
were assigned members, leases negotiated for ninety-nine years, and rather soon more than thirty small camps or cottages ringed the circle. These structures were rather primitive, wood shelters, usually two rooms downstairs and one big room upstairs divided by curtains, and a porch facing the river. Usually the cottages were thirteen feet wide and twenty feet long, set up on stones or posts a foot or so above the ground, and all were built so close together that passage between them was difficult for all but the many children who found it a good arrangement for a game of hide and seek.

By the year 1908, although the planks had been replaced by seats with back rests and other improvement had been made, a need for permanent arrangement was felt. During the summer, men went to the woods nearby, cut timber hauled it to the circle, and erected the Tabernacle. Preachers and laymen volunteered their services and soon a shelter was ready to protect the worshipers from the sun and rain. In recognition of the minister who founded the grounds, the building was named "The Aaron Hall Memorial Tabernacle".

The same heavy snow that collapsed the dormitory building also damaged the Tabernacle. The original roof was open at the peak, and a small roof elevated on posts about three feet high was constructed above that opening to present a more attractive structural appearance. The smaller roof fell with the weight of the snow and was replaced with one that simply overlapped the main roof. In later years, the original structure also collapsed from an overload of snow and was replaced by the current tabernacle.

One improvement undertaken by the "campground" for the conveniences of adults and pleasure of the children was the construction of the plank sidewalk between the grounds and the end of the bridge over the river. This walk was much-used promenade between meetings and a most welcome convenience for those visiting the stores across the river or the railroad station. The children delighted in riding bicycles along the walk, and infrequently compelled to make sudden changes in steering to avoid grass snakes sunning themselves on the warm planks. Later, the plank walk was replaced by a concrete sidewalk, financed by popular subscription, and remains may still be seen today where it paralleled the road. For some forty years Methodist camp meetings were held at Riverside. Usually the Presiding Elder of the Saratoga District had charge of the religious services, filling the days with meetings and securing speakers and leaders. From the platform searching and stirring gospel sermons, often long and loud, were given by prominent preachers of the Methodist denominations. Bishops and Secretaries and others of high office, and ministers in humbler positions, but equally powerful in devotion, proclaiming prayer, instructed, exhorted and petitioned the congregation to heed the call to follow Christ. The campground was a time and a place to ponder in sober thought about religion, deep conviction for sin, sincere, saving faith, and a definite consecration to the Christian life.

A missionary society was organized by the women. Special meetings were held for the young people. Crowds attended the Sunday services. The "grounds" served as a popular meeting place for relatives and friends. Many a courtship budded here and blossomed into marriage.

As the founding fathers ended their labors at Riverside, they were replaced by the next generation. These sons, A. Edison Hall, Embury Moston, Thomas Kneill, Charles Lavery, and others, joined by Mrs. Haviland, Aaron Hall's daughter, formed the Riverside Grove Association to succeed the Riverside Campground Meeting Association in the ownership of the property.

The new association was beset with problems almost from its beginning. Attendance at the former camp meeting type of service declined from year to year, repairs and maintenance of the grounds and buildings became more frequent and costly, and finances or lack thereof, became an important item on the agenda of every meeting of the new association. Offerings were taken in the services, but the worshipers were not numerous or generous enough to meet the operating expenses. After several years of interested individuals contributing enough to clear the yearly deficits, an attempt was made to increase the yearly income of the grounds. The association had a high board fence constructed around the grounds, placed a ticket office and attendant at the gate, and required payment of ten, fifteen or twenty five cents to enter the grounds, though one ticket was valid for the entire season and no offerings were taken during the services. In the beginning this was met with considerable protest, some people stayed away in protest, but gradually became reconciled to the charge, and the practice was continued until declining numbers in attendance made it in effective as income producing. The fence was removed in 1927, the ticket office building was converted into a canteen sitting by

the ballfield. It was demolished in 1982.

The cobblestone pillars, topped with electric lights, on either side of the road at the "gate" to the grounds are surviving gifts of the Dr. Albert D. Angell family. Dr. Angell expressed the idea of the pillars to Mrs. Angell as they returned to their home in Plattsburg after completion of his term as District Superintendent. Although Dr. Angell passed away before his idea reached fruition, Mrs. Angell, using the funds that had been given Dr. Angell by men of his District on the occasion of his return to the regular pastorate, and, adding funds of her own, had his wish carried out. They remain today as quiet, sturdy reminders of personal devotion of individuals to the "campground" and what it became to the hundreds of individuals who passed between those pillars or walked the road before they existed.

In 1912, in an effort to increase the interest of the younger generation in the campground experience, an offer was extended for the use of the grounds and buildings, with the contribution of one hundred dollars toward the cost of the program, to a group or young pastors of the District who were ready and willing to work hard in developing the possibilities of "Riverside" as a Summer center for Christian youth.

The first Institute held in Riverside was in 1912, under the leadership of the Reverend John Lowe Fort, the new Superintendent of the Saratoga District. The Reverend Thomas M Bishop had suggested that the Institute be called the Church Workers Conference, as he, Dr Fort, and Dr Angell were traveling home together to Broadalbin and Gloversville from the Annual Conference session. Reverend Bishop was named Secretary of the Executive Committee which included the three named individuals and the Reverend L.A. Brown, B.C. Dahms, and J.E. Thompson.

There were fifty delegates at the first Institute which was held for a full week, August 5-11, including two Sundays following the camp meeting. Dr Fort served as chairman for two years. For the next seven years Dr Luther Brown served as leader of the conference, which, for a few years, followed the camp meeting as had the first session in 1912. Interest in the camp meeting experience lessened year by year and finally the meeting was discontinued.

Attendance at the Church Workers Conference increased gradually, reaching 297 in Dr Brown's class, 1920. The faculty was composed of pastors of the local conference and leaders from other conferences. The Sunday preachers included Bishops Quayle, Oldham, Burt and Keeney, Dr Sheridan, then Secretary of Epworth League, and Dr Dan B Brummitt, then editor of the Epworth Herald.

In 1919, at the urgent request of the central office of the Epworth League, the leaders of the Church Workers Conference became affiliated with the central body, accepting it's offer of assistance in providing teachers, and assuming the name of the Riverside Epworth League Institute. Dr Albert D Angell, another founder of the Church Workers Conference was chosen Dean of the Institute and served from 1921 to 1924. In 1922 the enrollment at the Institute numbered 387.

In response to growing demands, student government was instituted in 1921, kerosene lamps were replaced in **1923 with a Delco system providing electricity** (the fire jacks were continued in use as a tribute to former days), and a custom begun of holding a sunrise service at the summit of Campground mountain. Dr Cassius J Miller, who had been associate Dean, became Dean of the Institute in 1924 and served for three years. During this period, the surviving members of the Riverside Grove Association offered to donate the property to the Institute provided the later would assume a note for $1,200. After considerable discussion the offer was accepted and the Institute became incorporated. Dr Miller continued to serve as Dean and became President of the newly created corporation.

It is to be noted that the Certificate of Incorporation, approved Dec 31, 1925, set forth the purposes for which the corporation was formed to be:

"To conduct as an institute an annual program of religious education for young people of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Troy Conference, and to conduct or hold religious services during any session of such institute.

To acquire by purchase, or otherwise, and to sell, mortgage or lease real estate and personal property, as may be necessary for the purposes herein before expressed, subject to restrictions or limitations by law."

Article 2, provides the objects of the corporation shall be:

"a. the fostering of the spiritual life
b. the development of the Christian character
c. the guidance of the Christian activities of young people

To these ends it shall conduct the Institute."

The Institute continued to provide yearly sessions of religious education/worship services through 1964 when the Troy Conference acquired its own property at Sky Farm, Warrensburgh. Since then, until recently, the campground residents, many of them third generation of the founding fathers, had arranged for Summer services and occasional weekend retreats. The Tabernacle continues to serve during the Summer sessions as a house of Christian worship.

In addition to the devoted servants named above in their service to the Institute and the individuals touched by it's programs, these may be added the following (by no means complete) individuals who contributed so freely of time, talent, and service for the furthering of the outreach of the Institute, the pursuit of its objectives, and the enrichment of all those who were privileged to enjoy the "Riverside experience": Leon B Randall, L.A. Barker, Alan F Bain, Charles Russell, F.J. Reid. R.C. Cook, Leonard Ives and Paul Hydon.

On 15 September 1924 a **disastrous fire** occurred on the campground which destroyed thirteen cottages along the river side of the circle. The cause remained a mystery in view of most of the cottages being unoccupied at the time. The fire began at the rear of one of the cottages and quickly spread to the others as all the buildings were within a few feet of the neighboring buildings on either side. Men of the area were successful finally, to quench the fire at the path on the south side of the grounds and partially burned the Bain cottage on the north side. (The story goes that a cottage was tipped into the fire to prevent it from spreading further) The space formerly occupied by thirteen cottages now is occupied by six structures.

The threat of another disastrous fire occurred in 1915 when the bottling works burned across the river and was destroyed. Flying embers crossed the river and set fire to Carpenter Mountain. The top of the mountain was burned over and flames came down close to the campground, but were put out before damage occurred.

In conclusion, in telling the "campground story", it is fitting to call the attention of those worshipping these days in the Tabernacle to the Altar, Cross, Candle Sticks, and Lectern. These were built by Sea Bees during World War II and used for Navy field services in the north of France by Chaplain Taylor E Miller. Following the war, the Navy transported them back to the States, and, with the consent of the Board of Directors, Chaplain Miller had them placed here where he had spent all the summers of his boyhood.

No finer dedication could be made of these symbols of our Christian faith than that by Dr Miller, the father of Chaplain Miller;

"At this alter, then, where men knelt in worship and prayer before they went to their death fighting for a great ideal, now young men and women kneel in consecration of high purpose, not to die, but to live for a great ideal- that of unselfish service for the Christ who challenges us with the Great Commission- "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and, lo, I am with you always to the close of the age."

-This concludes the article prepared by Glenn Fish-