

# Eleanor's Vignettes



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## Church camping has colorful past

Camping under religious auspices is a fascinating and colorful tapestry woven from diverse strands over the past three centuries. Each piece of the material came out of the needs and religious expression of its day and its people, with adaptation to societal trends, to changing conditions and theological beliefs over the years. In the journal of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, we find detailed descriptions of his travels in America. In 1672 and 1673 he preached to large audiences along the Chesapeake Bay region, as far north as Rhode Island and south to the Carolinas. At one meeting held at West River, which lasted four days and was "attended by 1,000 people including Indian Chiefs, he preached to Lord and Lady Baltimore and their retinue and others of importance."

People camped in tents wherever Fox preached for as long as he would stay. The logistics of food, water, shelter, and sanitation boggle the mind, as well as the stentorian voice needed.

Through the colonial and revolutionary periods and during the westward trek, religious camp meetings served the needs of settlers in isolated farms and tiny villages. They hungered for the fiery preaching, the teaching of the Word, and the social contacts. We read of 25,000 assembled in 1801 at Cove Ridge, Kentucky, as well as at meetings of only a day or two, wherever the Circuit Rider came through. People camped in their wagons or in makeshift tents, and used any available farm buildings for

communal social rooms. Preaching was in the open, following the English example of "preaching in the fields as did Jesus," when the Anglican churches were closed to John Wesley and his followers.

People of all Protestant faiths came together for worship and the Sacraments, and as the country became more settled, more adequate facilities were developed and strict rules were enforced.

The interests of children and youth were largely ignored in the nineteenth century churches and camp meetings. Recreation was frowned upon if not termed downright sinful. A 1905 report states, "There was some hesitation among the good brothers who controlled the camp grounds at Des Plaines, over letting the young Methodists come on it for any such purpose as holding a youth conference."

When the lease was finally signed it contained the stipulation that no games or other recreational features should be permitted. The result was an arrangement with a farmer for the use of an adjoining cornfield as a playfield.

Early in the twentieth century meetings known variously as Conferences, Institutes, and Assemblies were held at summer-conference grounds such as Lake Chautauqua, New York, Winona Lake, Indiana, and Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Along with Bible study classes, some recreation became available, causing many older church leaders to predict that boys' and girls' camps would be the ruin of the church. However, by the mid-twenties many denominations were seeing a vision of youth ministry suited to their needs, following in part the popular patterns set by private camps and youth agencies.

The story of St. Ann's Camp is a case in point. Brother Zephiriny, founder of St. Ann's Academy (1892, New York) had early organized camping excursions for the summer students at various sites in New York, New England, and Canada. He writes, "A desire to keep on our register boys with no home, entrusted to us by foreign and traveling parents, caused the opening of our vacation service."

It proved attractive to other boys and parents as well, because of the country, the educational travel, and the health-giving sports which it afforded. "The camp had a favorable balance at the end of every session, quite acceptable to our treasurers and houses of formation."

Two large tents at a site near Lake Champlain served as a base camp. Two years later a 40-acre adjoining plot was rented from the town of Auburn, Vermont, for 99 years to establish a

permanent camp. "Bungalows were built as needed for dormitories, dining, lounging, and all other accommodations . . . Sporting fields, wharves, boats, and rafts were built with care, and at considerable expense."

The boys were divided into sections 30 to 50 in charge of prefects. They led a busy life, "as every minute of the day they were occupied, under supervision, with exercises healthy for mind and body." After morning prayers, masses, and communion, a succession of periods led the boys through the day. We read of tennis, close quarter games, track, bicycle practices, and hiking, as well as swimming, boating, and water sports. Weekly, there were long hikes, meets with other camps, and stage, screen and other diversions. Time was allotted for reading and letter writing, but no mention is made of rest periods. All this with frequent visits from interested parents "filled the eight-week session with boyish glee, healthy entertainment and power for the scholastic efforts to come . . . Everything was kept in spotless condition, and no effort was ever spared by administrators or staff to procure an ideal season for every camper."

All of this made the camp increasingly attractive to campers and parents, and in 1925 enrollment was limited after the 200 mark was passed.

Brother Joseph Robert writes in conclusion, "We then began to think of diverting our energies to higher fields of endeavor and the camp was closed in 1930."

One might speculate with the benefit of hindsight that the problems of the depression forced the painful decision between maintaining the camp and putting all resources into the school—a dilemma all too frequent today.

The Brothers took comfort in this thought:

"Our example with that of similar virile pioneers finally woke the whole modern city population to the absolute need of its children for the properly supervised summer camp. We have camps by the hundreds today (1935?). All parishes and societies are providing this service to their thirsting patrons, and we may be proud that, although administrative difficulties have removed us from the passing current, we have done our large part in starting its flow."

Camping under religious auspices has broadened and developed in an unbroken line to the multi-purpose diverse contemporary youth camping programs of today.

*(Quotations are from the Marist Brothers' History of the U.S. Province, Chapter III, "Our Laurels")*