

# Wilmington Camp Meeting marks century of worship

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, July 30, 2004

WILMINGTON — A small, enthusiastic group gathered last weekend in a shaded grove outside Wilmington to mark a historic event: their 100th annual holiness camp meeting.

“I suppose in the scale of things, this is small peanuts,” said Jane Hardy Peck — “Aunt” Jane — as she guided a reporter through the camp earlier this month in preparation for a special anniversary service held last Saturday, July 24, “but people have come here every year for generations. Lives have been changed here, and those people have gone back to their communities to make a difference.”

To many, the words “camp meeting” might seem anachronistic, bringing to mind the “holiness” revivals of an earlier era — but, according to Aunt Jane, there are at least 1,000 camp meetings being held in 2004. In the North Country alone, camp meetings are still held in Brushton, Vermontville and Mooers, the latter being the camp meeting responsible for inspiring Wilmington’s nearly a century ago.

Though closely linked with Wilmington’s Church of the Nazarene — many of the families most involved with starting and continuing the camp meeting were also responsible for creating the Nazarene congregation that

moved into the old Congregational sanctuary — Wilmington Nazarene Pastor Marty Bausman says that the camp meeting, run in the holiness tradition, is nondenominational. It is owned and operated by the Wilmington Camp Meeting Association’s 15-member board.

## Meetings started

The Wilmington Camp Meeting was started in 1905 during a resurgence of the post-Civil War camp-meeting movement. B.S. Taylor, a nationally known holiness evangelist whose family came from Mooers, started the camp meeting there in 1902 —

about the same time as the Nazarene denomination was being formed.

“A group of people from Wilmington somehow found their way to Mooers,” wrote an anonymous author in the Wilmington camp’s 75th anniversary book. “These people all embraced the teachings of B.S. Taylor. ... After some tent meetings ... they met with Rev. Taylor to consider starting a camp meeting.”

“My father [Deane Hardy] gave the land for the camp,” said Jane Peck. He cut it out of his farm, up on the corner.”

“‘Holiness’ was the word that set the group apart from many churches,” wrote Wilmington’s anniversary author. “It was widely misunderstood, and the group sometimes was called ‘Holy Rollers.’”

“From personal observation, I never did see any rolling,” quipped the anniversary author,



The 100th annual camp meeting is celebrated at a commemoration service Saturday afternoon, July 24, in the “new” tabernacle, built around 1940.

“but I did see plenty of holy people.”

For years the camp meeting was harassed by locals, some years more vigorously than others.

“Outside the camp meeting some of the ‘Rough Gang’ would collect and harass, interrupt and interfere as much as they could,” recalled Donald G. Marshall of Wilmington in his oral memoir, recorded in 1991 when he was 72 years old.

“I remember they’d throw firecrackers to disrupt the congregation, and things like that. There would be lots of laughing, drinking and so forth.”

Earlier opposition to the Wilmington Camp Meeting was more virulent, according to a report published in the Essex County Republican in 1905 or 1906.

“All went well until Thursday evening, when a number of persons, most of them women, began to make disturbance by laughing and jeering in meeting,” wrote O.F. Maynard.

The following night, Maynard wrote, “a mob of women and men gathered in the highway in front of the tent.” They grabbed a man who had scolded those disturbing the meeting the night before, taking him “to a spot near the bank of the river, and there tar and feathers were applied.”

After taking care of their critic, the women came back, “march[ing] into the tent ... with concealed knives ... demanding that the tent be vacated. ... Some of the ropes of the tent were cut, and the mob continued to howl outside till midnight.



The Birch Bark Cabin is the oldest structure standing on the Wilmington Camp Meeting grounds. Built in 1907, it was one of the first two cabins constructed.

“But the Holiness people kept on praising God ... and a number of souls were saved and sanctified — even some of the mobbers.”

### **The tabernacle**

For more than a decade, the Wilmington Camp Meeting met under a large canvas tent. It wasn’t until 1916 that the “old” tabernacle was built, its packed-earth floor covered with sawdust.

“The sides of the old tabernacle were hinged,” Aunt Jane recalled. “They could open up like wings, and they could be propped up. When the tabernacle was full, people could gather close outside.”

The old tabernacle, however, was lost to fire in 1940 or 1941 — different stories mention both years.

“My father [Deane Hardy] feared it [the tabernacle fire] was from a spark produced by his little mill, which cut the wood he

used on his farm,” Peck said.

Once the fire started, it was only minutes until the entire building was consumed.

“He [Deane Hardy] never ran his mill after that,” Peck recalled.

The fire occurred just two weeks before camp meeting was scheduled to open that year.

A swarm of volunteers descended on the camp, cleaning up the debris and building the “new” tabernacle — which stands there today — in record time.

In 2004, the building looks much as it does in archival photos. The interior is plain in the extreme. A concrete floor slopes from the back door down to the altar and stage at the front, the slope creating a sanctuary that is much larger inside than one would expect from seeing the building’s exterior.

No ceiling or inside walls cover the 2x4” studs and 4x4” supporting beams. The effect is like the inside of a very solid,

very clean farm building that has been converted into a rustic auditorium.

At the front of the tabernacle is an extremely simple altar, looking rather like a set of solid, sanded sawhorses, placed end to end. As one participant in last weekend's anniversary service testified, "My most important memory of camp took place right here," he said, bending over and patting a spot on the altar rail where, one summer, his life had been changed.

"It's seen some good use over the years," observed Pastor Marty during a pre-service tour of the tabernacle.

"It's where God touches down," added Aunt Jane.

### Other buildings

Besides the tabernacle, the single most prominent building on

the Wilmington Camp Meeting grounds is the white, frame, two-story dining hall. Like the tabernacle, the current dining hall is a replacement, built over the ruins of the original structure, which was built around 1916. A girls' dormitory now occupies the building's second floor, which formerly served as a roughly partitioned family dorm.

The Children's Tabernacle, built decades back, stands in a corner of the camp grounds. It was used for several years as a boys' dorm, but it was recently restored for the children's services held each evening while the adults attend the revival meetings.

The oldest surviving structure on the grounds is the tiny Birch Bark Cabin, one of the camp's first two cabins, built around 1907.

Close to 20 more cabins stand on the camp grounds today.

"Some families build — or adopt — cabins," explained Pastor Marty, "but they belong to the [Wilmington Camp Meeting] Association."

Each cabin has its history.

One called the Construction Cabin made its way onto the camp meeting grounds some 30 years ago, remembers Jane Peck.

"It was the office for the construction crew building the 'new' Haselton bridge at that time," said Aunt Jane. "When the job was done, they were going to just tear it down, but some people asked if they could move it over here instead."

Several of today's camp-meeting shelters lived former lives as tourist cabins at a motel on the Au Sable River between Jay and Au Sable Forks.

The last cabin built on the grounds is called, simply, Dana's Log Cabin. The simple, sturdy structure was made by Jane Peck's husband, "Uncle" Dana Peck, in 1992, after his retirement.

"He did the whole thing, everything, himself," Jane recalled. "He even cut the logs."

The latest addition to the Wilmington Camp Meeting campus is the new, cinder-block bathhouse. Its construction just a year or two ago left the old, frame bathhouse free to be used for other purposes.

Half of the old bathhouse building — which was originally the Hardy Farm's granary — is now used as a workshop. The other half is the camp's medical unit, mandated by the state Health



From left: George Warren, Marty Bausman, Jack Preston and Greg Peck sing during the 100th Camp Meeting anniversary service last Saturday.



Viola Hathaway, left, helped by visiting evangelist Tamla Leckrone, gives her testimony at Saturday's anniversary service.

Department, complete with an isolation room and shower for anyone who comes down with a serious, infectious disease while attending camp.

### **Celebrating camp life**

The Wilmington Camp Meeting experience is a hybrid creature: part family vacation, part kids' summer camp, part revival meeting — all of it infused by the spirituality that forms camp's core.

"Even if we come onto this place in the middle of the fall, just for a minute to take care of a building, we can feel it," Bausman said during Saturday's 100th anniversary service. "This is a holy place."

For the week or so when camp is in session, the campers' day starts at 7:30 a.m. with a prayer meeting. Folks are free each day to enjoy the region's attractions — Whiteface Mountain, Santa's Workshop, hiking the High Peaks or fishing the famous Au Sable — but every evening they return for

revival services.

Voluntarism is as much a part of the Wilmington Camp Meeting culture as preaching, singing, prayer and commitment.

"One of the reasons this camp has been such a success is the volunteers," said Jane Peck. "About the only one who gets paid is the cook."

Several speakers at last Saturday's anniversary service mentioned the sense of privilege they felt as youngsters when they finally became old enough to take up certain chores around camp and pitch in.

Today's Wilmington Camp Meeting draws fewer camper-worshippers than it once did. About 50 people attended last weekend's special anniversary service, but longtime camper Gene Loughran recalled, "I can remember this tabernacle being filled with people, to the point where you couldn't find a seat."

The anniversary service was a time when campers shared old songs and sharp memories with

one another of camp life and what it had meant to them and their families.

For some, the memories were of the youth camp, held the week before the regular camp meeting.

Jonathan Bausman, Pastor Marty's son, has been coming to the camp meetings for 10 years, ever since his father had become pastor of the Wilmington Nazarene Church. Jonathan, recently graduated from college and newly married, recalled his experience at youth camp, "running through the field, playing capture the flag — and just about to be thrown into 'jail.'"

Marcia Peck started coming to the Wilmington Camp Meeting in 1979 at the invitation of a schoolmate at Eastern Nazarene College, Dana D. Peck, son of Uncle Dana and Aunt Jane Peck — and, later, Marcia's husband.

"You have to understand, I'm a city girl," Marcia Peck shared with her fellow campers. "It was refreshing for me to come up here and see this jewel in the woods."