

Cypress Camp Ground Meeting – 1794 ~

According to the Cypress Methodist Church records, the Cypress meeting dates to 1794, when Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury, who would cover a reported 300,000 miles on horseback “field preaching” across the new country. He came across Cypress chapel while riding to ford Wassamassaw Swamp on the way from Lebanon to Charleston. He stopped and held forth, inaugurating the Cypress Camp Meeting. It’s a Christian worshipping event that takes place annually during the week that “embraces the fourth Sunday in October.”

A notice found by this writer in October 18, 1884’s *Charleston News and Courier* reads: “Cypress Camp-Meeting – as many persons from Charleston have expressed a desire to attend the Cypress Camp-meeting near Ridgeville tomorrow, the South Carolina Railway will sell tickets, good on any of its trains tomorrow, from Charleston to Ridgeville and return for \$.150.”

Back in the day, the 53-tent campground was built in a square from the tabernacle alongside the church from which it is named. It is the most primitive of the four meetings, with no electricity or running water in the tents. Located on about nine acres northwest of the Great Cypress Swamp, and adjacent to Cypress United Methodist Church, the gathering boasts these tents that have been passed down through the generations. The simple wooden cottages are more affectionately called tents, and long-time attendants of the event refer to the week as “tenting.” Tents and covered wagons were the original structures the families set up for their homes during the early days of camp-meeting.

“I look forward to camp-meeting and Christmas more than any other time of the year,” says one who’s attended for sixty years. Christmas is a time for family, she said, while camp-meeting is a time to catch up on visits with friends. “My family brought me out here when I was a baby, and I brought my babies out here too.”

For years and years, the families have made do with kerosene lanterns and drawing water from well hand pumps. Some of the more elderly members’ thoughts on the matter were, “If you put in electricity, first thing you know people will be watching the ball games and soap operas.” However, in recent years, electric lights have been hung and water lines run to spigots on the grounds.

Camp meetings occur in October, featuring lots of youth activities as well as church activities and fellowship. “You get away from everything. It seems like everybody gets together and talks (which is something that, unfortunately, lots of

people don't do anymore). You've got to get down there to experience what's going on . . . and what a wonderful experience it is."

The scene is picturesque. Early in the morning, a goodly number of people assemble at the spacious covered shed, called "the stand," and engage in morning prayer. At the end of this service, breakfast is served. So many visitors are present that they are obliged to eat in turns. Tables are spread, a number eat and retire; the board is replenished, and a new set are refreshed; and this clearing and fixing of tables is occasionally repeated four or five times. At dinner, the same order is a necessity, and actually, a greater number of spreads are required.

Keeping in mind, it's the 1800's, and it doesn't take long for the roads are become fairly alive with conveyances of all kinds, bearing all kinds of men, women, and children, and many are approaching on foot. It is plain that the rich and the poor are to meet together. In what seems like just a little while, there is a cordon of vehicles all around the camp-ground . . . most circling in the rear of the circle of tents (cottages). Horses are tethered to trees or wagons, or to crude hitching posts, set in the ground. Besides the wide array of country visitors, the presence of many Charleston people is noticed. About two thousand people are on the grounds.

The young folks, in their best finery, begin to walk in couples round and round in front of the tent doors, and the older people and children sit beside the doors on benches and chairs. All this changes when a sound sweeps over the encampment, and as it grows louder and louder, it's known to be heard over a mile away. It is the trumpet which calls the people to assemble for worship. This trumpet at Cypress is a huge "conch" bored at the end. It's amazing how soft and yet how strong the sound can be when a competent trumpeter is at hand. As the sound is heard, the more pious of the crowds step within the tents for secret prayer, and the others busy themselves getting ready to go out. In less than five minutes, streams of people pass down the walks to the stand, with the benches quickly filling. Chairs are brought until the supply is apparently exhausted. Then numbers of young men draw nearer and stand about in groups.

Someone begins with a song. He's usually joined by hundreds of voices. Some sing by rules of music, some by a natural gift for song, and some in tones that surpass description . . . just awesome! Yet, the music made by this combination is sweet and wonderfully pleasing. Perhaps a second and even a third Christian song is sung. Then, the preacher, who is to conduct the service rises, reads his hymn and the congregation stands and sings it, two lines at a time. This announcement of the

hymn, two lines at a time, while singing, is necessary to enable all the people to unite in the singing. Prayer follows. The crowd under the stand kneels and persons around the stand uncover their heads. It is a singular spectacle. Prayer ends. Lessons from scripture are read and another hymn is sung (while the audience is seated). Then the sermon follows . . . usually delivered with considerable pointedness and earnestness. At its end, another minister rises to “exhort,” to urge the hearers to immediate “acceptance of religious privilege” and definite action in the matter. He ends by announcing a hymn, and as this is being sung, people are called to approach the crude altar around the rustic pulpit for prayer. As these folks come and kneel, older members go to them and offer instructions, low in tone of voice, seeking not to disturb prayers of others. The call ends, the congregation is seated and begins singing again while instruction of penitents goes on. After a few minutes, prayer is offered, and the penitents are especially remembered. After this, though some penitents remain kneeling, song and prayer continue, sometime nearly an hour, but ends before time for the next service to begin. There is no formal dismissal of the congregation from its beginning, until the camp meeting breaks up on the last morning.

At 3 p.m., a service is given to the children. The little ones were grouped near the altar, and they sang the songs with evident enjoyment, and then listened to several brief addresses by the ministers. At night, the pastors of the charges represented at the camp-meeting conduct the services. Some pastors lead in introductory devotions, other pastors sang, and/or told of his experience, exhorted and called penitents for prayer. A large number respond and quite a few conversions followed. The service progressed and ended in shouts and songs and tears of joy.

A story to tell in which Cypress stands alone: in the mid-to-late 1800’s it was a custom permitted “Marcus,” a colored gentleman who sometimes preached, to assemble the colored people after the service of the whites was over and hold religious worship for them. This congregation would sing lyrics more peculiar to the colored people (even though many whites would join in the singing). Then Marcus proceeded forth with much emphasis of God’s word. His hearers, both colored and whites (many standing around, listening to the lessons preached), were sometimes ‘hearty’ with their responses. Marcus had strong lungs and voice, enabling all the folks to hear him well . . . and he could preach!!!

It’s late now, the last meeting is dismissed. The crowds melt slowly away, out of sight . . . except here and there a few lingering in conversations until “the wee

hours.” Finally, all have disappeared . . . given themselves to “nature’s sweet restorer, balmy sleep.” Silence reigns for a while. Then . . . the darkness in the east is pierced by long lines of dim light, and a few of the extra early habits began to emerge from the tents. The lines broadened and brightened until another day was at hand. The trumpet sounded, and all gathered at the stand for the last prayer. A song, a prayer, and a few earnest words of exhortation to the converts and the doxology sung, finally the benediction pronounced, and Cypress Camp Meeting for 1887 was ended.

Edited by Keith Gourdin