

TABERNACLE

By Mrs. L. A. Lavender

Tabernacle-Part I

I remember my first visit to Tabernacle, Methodist Camp Ground, and the lasting impression the camp made on me.

To many Columbians, "Tabernacle" is a well known institution, since it is almost as old as the town of Columbus. Organized in 1828, by a group of Methodist pioneer settlers, Tabernacle, according to Lipscomb's History, "antedated the Columbus Methodist Church about four years." Since its beginning, Tabernacle has had a continuous existence, except for a few years during the War Between the States and in 1917, when it was burned by forest fires. The camp is located about ten miles from Columbus on Highway 50 East.

My memorable visit was made in 1909. My sister and I had been invited to visit the J. W. Lavender family, who lived on a large farm twelve miles east of Columbus. The visit was timed to coincide with service at Tabernacle, which were held each summer in August.

At 5 A.M., we left our home in Russellville, Alabama, traveling by train and arriving in Columbus in the late afternoon-a full day's travel for a distance of little more than a hundred miles. Irene and Louie Lavender met us in Columbus and took us in a surrey to their country home. None of the roads were paved, neither were the streets of Columbus; few were even heavily graveled: Even with two horses, it took three hours to go that twelve miles.

Early the next morning we were awakened to find the Lavender family buzzing with action and excitement, as they prepared for the trip to Tabernacle. The women saw that linens were smoothly placed in trunks; dresses and other wearing apparel pressed and laid on top of the linens; jellies, jams, preserves, and pickles, home canned and dried fruit packed; staple groceries put in boxes; dozens of pies, cakes, and loaves of home-made bread packed in tall cans and tightly closed to keep them fresh; and baskets of fresh fruits and vegetables gathered for use in the first days of camp.

Outdoors the men hustled around seeing that the crop was "laid by" and that pasture fences were mended to keep livestock safe inside while the family was away.

The next day the men and some of the farm hands loaded wagons with fresh oat straw, which they took to the camp ground. There, they piled the straw high on bunks built in the cabins, or "tents" as they called them. They covered the straw with quilts or other heavy material in preparation for feather beds to be placed on top. Already, the men had cleaned the grounds; put fresh sawdust on the dirt floors; swept down the walls; mended any leaks in the roofs; and covered the frame of the front porch with tree limbs.

The next morning at the farm, breakfast was early to give the wood stove time to cool off for moving and so that the last pots, pans, and dishes might be packed. These things were then loaded on wagons, which also carried cured hams, coops of chickens, and feed for the horses and a cow, taken along to provide fresh milk. After the wagons, the family followed in a surrey.

I had heard nothing but "tents" and "what we'll do in the tents." When we reached the camp, imagine my surprise when I saw, not tents, but rows of rough cabins which looked like horses' stables. I thought, "Where will the people stay?" Soon I was to see one of these rough cabins converted into a wonderful Christian home.

Quickly two cooks, taken along from the farm, had the kitchen in order, and such a delectable aroma floated from the cook shed that all gathered around to see "What's for supper?" Meanwhile, water boys plied back and forth, bringing water from a spring, milking cans and buckets with cool water for drinking, cooking and bathing (the old-fashioned way!)

Tabernacle-Part II

By Saturday, all the families were settled in their "tents". Services began on Saturday night with a prayer service. Then followed a "tent-holders" meeting, at which officers were elected for the camp. The camp was organized much like a small town.

Sunday morning at sunrise, the traditional horn blew, summoning people to prayer under the wooden arbor. Everyone came to this service dressed as they were in their cabins, but later in the day, the young people especially, dressed again for every service.

Besides the sunrise service each day, the schedule provided for eight, eleven, three, and seven o'clock services, in addition to grove meetings at five in the afternoons. At the grove meetings, held under the trees in secluded spots, prayers were offered for members of their families and their friends who did not know Christ as Savior. No one was embarrassed to ask prayer for their children, calling each by name.

Ministers came from far and near for this season of spiritual refreshing, which lasted through Wednesday night. The ministers stayed in the "Preachers' Tent". Soon after arriving, they gathered with the Presiding Elder, now called District Superintendent, and planned who would preach at each service. So many preachers came; seldom did one get to preach his second sermon. It was not unusual for eight or ten ministers to be present at a service. With "Amen's!" coming from all these servants of God, a speaker poured his whole soul into his message, with the result that many were converted and scores of lives rededicated. At least one sermon was directed to the call of the ministry or to the mission field. This sermon was usually preached by Dr. W. G. Henry, uncle of John R. Henry of Columbus.

The choir loft was filled for every service with untrained voices of visitors and campers-Methodists and people of other denominations. Song service was led by the first male coming to the choir who would assume the responsibility. The organ was played by different persons, too, as the great old hymns of the church rang out over the hills.

After the eleven o'clock services, no visitor went away without at least one invitation to dinner. It amazed me how the cooks always knew when to keep on cooking. There were never fewer than three tables with ten at a table. No one objected to waiting, for the food never gave out.

Between services, young people played games, took walks, or listened to older people tell how their forefathers trekked to this hilly, wooded place for a season of prayer and preaching way back in 1828; how they came on foot, on horseback, and in covered wagons, and cooked on the open fire. They told of the earliest campers-the Joyners, Lavenders, Randals, Henrys, Eubanks, Murrahs, and Storeys.

They spoke of Methodist leaders who had spoken here, mentioning the Bishops R. K. Hargrove, W. B. Murrah, J. H. McCoy, W. A. Chandler, J. L. Decell, and the Reverend Sam A. Steel, F. B. Culver, and L. C. Branscomb.

I made my second visit to Tabernacle in 1911, as a bride of a few weeks, this time a real part of the Lavender family. Then there were 52 cabins arranged in two rows around the arbor. Since that time, the camp has burned twice. Each time fewer cabins have been rebuilt. Today there are 17 well-screened cabins, some floored, but most with traditional sawdust floors. All are furnished with comfortable beds, electrical appliances, running water, and other conveniences. Services extend from the third through the fourth Sundays in August and are limited to three each day instead of the six of yesterday.

Tabernacle Camp Meeting still remains the greatest time of the year to the fifth, sixth, and even the seventh generations of the original families who organized the camp in 1828, and to others now owning cabins there.