

The Historical Society of the Bible Fellowship Church
August, 2107

Summertime. Are you thinking about getting ready for camp meeting? Probably not but a few are still around who remember that summertime meant camp meeting.

I was asked to give our story of camp meetings at Pinebrook this summer. For five Wednesdays in row I shared how we started at Chestnut Hill, went to Mizpah, and then moved to Pinebrook. I have been telling the story but it also sent me back to go through some of the details I had accumulated and noticed some new things. I also had some other sources from newspaper accounts written at the time. I hope to allow you to go back by reprinting some of the accounts.

One of the facts I had not fully appreciated was when our history of Camp Meeting began. Jonas Musselman said that our first camp was held in 1881. A camp meeting had been held in 1880 at Fetters Grove in Indiana which was said to be the first Mennonite camp meeting. While reading C. H. Brunner's accounts of camp meeting again, I saw that he states that meetings were first held in 1879 at Chestnut Hill. I went searching to see if I could find some other reference to these meetings but I found absolutely none. I looked through the reliable sources, the Gospel Banner, the minutes of the Annual Conference and the Allentown Democrat. Absolutely nothing, no mention of these meetings. So what we have is C. H. Brunner's account of these first meetings. I think we have no reason to doubt C. H.'s memories as he claims to have been there. He would have been about 15 so he would have taken it all in. In the table C. H. prepared listing all the camp meetings, he has a footnote in which he calls the first meeting at Chestnut Hill a grove meeting. Perhaps, it was not considered a camp meeting.

Brunner remembered:

According to our record of Camp Meetings in the end of our Year Book, their origin in the Pennsylvania Conference was the result of a Grove Meeting on Chestnut Hill, between Coopersburg and Limeport, Lehigh County, in August, 1879. In August, 1880, the first Camp Meeting was held in this grove with one large tent. This was owned and occupied by one of our pastors, Abel Strawn.
(From the 1928 Year Book)

The writer well remembers August 1879 when the congregations of Zionsville, then called Upper Milford, Fleetwood, Coopersburg, Springtown and Quakertown held several Grove Meetings on Chestnut Hill near Limeport. These services

were largely attended so that by the following summer several families made and erected canvas tents of their own. (From the 1941 Year Book)

Because events like these don't just come out of the blue, the question rises as to who, when and where someone observed something that made them propose to hold camp meeting. The Allentown Democrat reports a camp meeting held in the summer of 1879 in Pennsburg by German Methodists. Did someone from the Evangelical Mennonites attend this and get an idea? There is no way to know for sure at this point.

C. H. Brunner wrote about these early camp meetings in the 1941 Year Book nearly 60 years later. Some of his details may have been blurred and lumped together. He gives us a good picture of these early days.

A small temporary pulpit was erected in the rear of which some of the invited preachers slept. Seats made of rough unplanned hemlock boards without backs were constructed. A large tent forty by sixty feet and several hundred camp stools were purchased to be used on rainy days. Soon the number of tents came up to thirty and more. Thus began the annual Chestnut Hill Camp Meetings. Even in those horse and buggy days people came from quite a distance. As many as five hundred vehicles of every description were reported present on Sundays parked along the road and in the fields. These gatherings soon became annual events known far and near. Ministers from Ohio, Indiana, Canada and New York City were among the guest speakers.

From the beginning the water supply was a serious problem. Water was hauled there in barrels by one of the neighboring farmers. Then the Camp Meeting Committee composed of laymen decided to dig a well in which the writer assisted. After digging down seventy feet with no signs of water the project was abandoned. Thus for eighteen years all the water for cooking and drinking purposes for more than thirty families had to be hauled. [Brunner adds in his 1928 history, "During the eighteen years of Camp Meetings in this grove a man had to be secured who would haul the water used for drinking and cooking in barrels from a distance. Often old whiskey barrels were used for this purpose, often giving the water a peculiar taste."]

During all these years there had never been a cafeteria, restaurant, nor provision store allowed in the grove. There were no refrigerators and no ice. As the tents had no floors, some buried a box in the ground in a corner of their tent to keep their butter and milk. A butcher and a baker came in a few times a week. For a stove some families secured the top of an old cook stove or range and with a few bricks or stones made a fireplace under it.

Practically all of the campers of these pioneer Camp Meeting days were farmers. Some members of these families had to go home every day to do the milking and feeding. Some of the women had to go home to do some baking and bring provisions back to camp. As there was no restaurant within two miles of camp, visitors coming for the day brought their lunch along while these good generous, hospitable Pennsylvania German campers always entertained alternately those preachers and visitors from Canada, Ohio, Indiana and other places. Such were the good old days of our early Camp Meetings.

To my knowledge, no pictures of events on Chestnut Hill exist. If they do, I do not know of them. This picture of the Hellertown Camp Meeting, held in 1909, seems to look much like what Brunner describes. So, if you take away the tents, you probably have a good idea of what you might have seen. [Note: the picture is mislabeled – not Mizpah]



The summer of 1880 brought the concept of camp meeting to the Indiana Conference at a place called Fetter's Grove on the farm of Simon Fetter. Some Pennsylvania folks attended. Abel and Hannah Strawn, Jonas and Lucy Musselman and John Traub were there. They traveled together. Hannah and Lucy were sisters so it was probably family time. Strawn wrote a report of their trip to the Gospel Banner and tells of their visit to this camp.

From here we came to Goshen, Ind., where we were met by a team sent by Bro. Brenneman, to convey us to the Camp-meeting in progress seven miles west of the city. Upon the camp ground we were kindly greeted by many dear brethren and sisters, with whom we had never met before, and could at once make ourselves quite at home among them.

The spirit of God came in mighty power, at times seemingly over the whole encampment, wonderfully moving upon the people both saints and sinners. I never before witnessed nor felt such a melting power at a camp-meeting. These dear people were as near and dear to us, as though we had always been acquainted with each other. We were only sad at parting from them so soon again... (The Gospel Banner, September 1880, page 143)

This visit must have made a big impression on them. The next summer, the camp meeting was to be a bigger affair. Jonas Musselman says they put up the tabernacle for the first time. Apparently, what was intended was bigger and better than the previous year. What is a bit confusing is that he calls this the first camp meeting in Pennsylvania. Perhaps, the meetings of 1879 and 1880 were not viewed as camp meetings. Jonas wrote a report on the event in September, 1881.

Pennsylvania Camp Meeting

Quakertown, PA., Aug. 25

Dear Bro. Brenneman:-- For the satisfaction of your readers, I wish to say that our camp-meeting closed on Sunday evening, Aug. 21st. Our committee found a suitable place in a grove owned by Milton Kauffman, where on the morning of Aug. 12th, we met with the brethren to rear the tabernacle for the first time. Having everything in readiness, we first went down upon our knees before the Lord to implore his blessing to attend the measures thus being entered upon to the glory of his great Name. By two o'clock the tabernacle was standing in readiness for use. We next put up a stand with a sleeping room attached, in connection with several other sleeping apartments, besides other tents, and covered wagons were arranged for the accommodation of those in attendance. Also a large house near by was accessible. Thus, Aug. 13th, at two o'clock all was in readiness with plenty of seats. We secured also one hundred and fifty chairs for the large tent in which we held our prayer and class meetings. With the exception of a few days, we could comfortably supply all with seats. The masses of people assembled upon the occasion, seemingly came to hear God's word. There was good order from beginning to end. The order of worship was as follows:

In the morning, at half past six, there was family worship; at half past eight, prayer meeting in the large tent; ten o'clock, preaching; one o'clock, and half past six, prayer-meeting; two o'clock and in the evening, preaching.

Oh, I can not express my feelings of joy and gratitude to God for the camp-meeting. The brethren and sisters too are generally quite well satisfied with the results of the meeting. The meetings were conducted strictly on the holiness line, and quite a number entered the land of Beulah. Some at the commencement could not understand what these things meant, and were "in doubt whereunto this might grow." But as the power of God was so wonderfully displayed, many began to change their minds and concluded that after all, it is better in the land of Canaan, than in the wilderness, after having gotten a glimpse of the fruits that were brought from thence, and concluded to stand and walk by faith, rather than feeling. Praise God for his power. Each day and night he gave us a new baptism of the Holy Ghost. On Monday morning, the 15th, baptism was administered in the stream near the encampment.

Oh, I can not express my feelings in regard to the work of the Lord! May God be pleased to move the ark forward with all speed. Last year some of us were permitted to attend the first camp-meeting held by the E. U. Mennonites in Indiana; this year we attended the first in Pennsylvania. I can not say as yet, how it will be in reference to the first in Canada, to commence on Sept. 14th; just as the Lord will. Oh, let us all pray earnestly for those who have entered by faith the land of Beulah, as well as for those who have not as yet ventured over, that God may give to the latter, boldness and faith to launch out upon his promises, and to the former, sufficient manliness and integrity to stand firm upon the immovable Rock.

The power of God, as displayed at times upon the encampment, was such that a number were not able to stand, but were crushed to the earth. Some were not able to rise for over an hour. God's wonderful works and glorious saving power, were to a greater or less extent seen and felt in each meeting during the encampment. Glory to his name! Our Presiding Elder, Bro. Gehman, became so intensely interested in the work of the Lord, and so filled with his power, that he at once purchased the grove for the express purpose of holding annual camp-meetings there, as it is a beautiful location as well as a central point on our work. May God bless Bro. Gehman.

I can say that during my ministerial labors, I have never enjoyed myself better than I did during our camp-meeting. I heard a number saying that if spared to see the return of another camp-meeting occasion, they would move right to the encampment and continue there to the close, as they had learned by experience, that home was no place of contentment during the time of a good camp-meeting.

Dear pilgrims, let us live by faith, trusting in God, and whatever we need, let us bring it to God through Jesus in prayer. Oh, "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." "I am very happy," and just now I am "Sweetly resting."

Jonas Musselman

The Allentown Democrat took note of this event and presented what its reporter observed.

The Mennonite Camp Meeting –

The Mennonites of the lower end of the county are this week holding a camp meeting in the woods of Mr. Milton Kauffman near Limeport. The tents, along with a large canvas tabernacle procured from Ohio, were erected on Saturday, and the grounds the same day consecrated to the uses for which designed for the coming week, in the presence of a large concourse of people. The attendance so far has been quite large, the villages and towns around about being largely represented, with a great many coming from a distance, and as a consequence the roads leading to the woods for the last few days have presented a lively scene. On Sunday the crowd exceeded that of any other witnessed on a similar occasion in these parts – there being a very large mass of people present in the afternoon. – The meeting is a decided success, and there is every prospect of it terminating satisfactorily on Saturday morning next, at which time the campers propose drawing stakes and departing for home. The people comprising the gatherings so far drawn into attendance seemed to be inspired with a strict regard of the occasion, and conducted themselves in an orderly and decent manner. (The Allentown Democrat, August 17, 1881, page 2)

The Annual Conference of February, 1882, brought the camp meeting into its organization structure and oversight.

Resolved: That the Presiding Elder shall appoint the time to hold the camp meeting and preside over the same.

Resolved: That a committee of five brethren be appointed to make arrangements for the camp meeting. The committee follows: M. A. Zyner, Milton Kauffman, J. Roeder, John Musselman and William Yeakel.

Resolved: That a committee of three brethren be appointed to take charge of the tabernacle for one year. The committee is as follows: William Gehman, A. Strawn and Jonas Musselman.

Resolved: That at our camp meeting no boarding tent shall be erected where victuals are sold and no tobacco smoking allowed on the camp ground.

The fact that a tabernacle had been purchased and needed a committee to care for it shows that the camp meeting had already become more than a few people in a grove and that we (then known as the Evangelical United Mennonites) saw it as part of their future ministry.

The following year brought camp meeting to Chestnut Hill again. No one from Pennsylvania wrote a report for the banner but Gospel Banner editor Daniel Brenneman was there and was delighted to tell what he saw.

This was the fifth camp-meeting which we were permitted to attend during this season, all of which we can say to the honor of God, were precious "seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord," owned and blessed in the conversion of precious souls. In point of power and interest, this meeting was equal to any we have attended. The meeting continued one week. About twenty-five or thirty were converted, and quite a number experienced the blessing of perfect love. Eleven were baptized and nearly all united in church fellowship, and doubtless others will soon follow their example, which is the duty of every Christian believer.

The ministering brethren, Peffley and Snyder, of the "United Church of Christ," attended the meeting. We trust a union will yet be affected with these dear people in due time.

At the request of Bro. J. H. Moyer who has for a long time been afflicted with deafness, which is a great detriment to him in his work as an evangelist, and sister Alice Souder, who also has been seriously afflicted for some time, were both "anointed with oil," and prayed over by "the elders of the church, in the name of the Lord," both of whom seem to be firmly resting upon the promises of God by faith, that the prayer of faith shall save the sick." We have no room to doubt but that the result will be according to their faith.

The children's meetings were well attended, and resulted in the conversion of a number of them. On Tuesday (the 29th), the several Sabbath-schools of Upper Milford, Coopersburg and Quakertown, numbering 233 scholars, met together upon the encampment, to whom ten short addresses by the several ministers and superintendents were given, which with the good singing intervening by the several schools, made the occasion a very enjoyable as well as profitable one.

The meeting closed Wednesday, Aug. 30th, by three-minute sermons by each minister present, after which a circle was formed and a hearty farewell and

God speed with a warm shaking of the hand was extended to each other by the dear pilgrims, with the shedding of many tears, not however without the hope and confidence of meeting again, if not on earth in heaven.

“Here we meet to part again,

In heav’n we part no more,” [Gospel Banner – September 15, 1882 – page 40]

By August, 1883, the camp meeting at Chestnut Hill was becoming an institution and yearly part of the calendar of the church. The Allentown Democrat noted the preparation and announcement.

Chestnut Hill Camp Meeting –

Next Wednesday the annual camp meeting of the E. U. Mennonites of the lower end of the county will commence on the old camp ground on Chestnut Hill, between Coopersburg and Limeport. It is to continue for one week, and will have the presence of a large number of ministers from abroad, some even from Canada. The committee of arrangements are energetically at work perfecting all preparations looking to the welfare of those desiring to attend, and to the preservation of perfect order and peace within the encampment. There will be no boarding tent, nor any huckster stands, and smoking on the ground will also be prohibited. Arrangements have been perfected with North Penn. railroad for the sale of excursion tickets to Coopersburg at all points between Bethlehem and Lansdale. At Coopersburg, hacks will be in readiness to convey visitors to the grounds. It is confidently expected that the meeting will be largely attended, and we heartily wish our Mennonite friends all possible success in their commendable enterprise, and ardently hope that the material and spiritual interests of our common Zion may be largely enhanced, and that much good will be done in the name of the Lord and Master. The time for the meeting of the Sunday Schools of the denomination has been changed to Tuesday, 28th, if the weather is favorable, and if not, the next day. [The Allentown Democrat – August 15, 1883 – page 3]

The newspaper carried an additional article immediately following the announcement of the camp meeting.

The Camp Meeting Law.- As some two or three camp meetings are yet to be held within the limits of our county, it will be of interest to know the requirements of the act (introduced by the Hon. Ernst Nakel, of this county.) made a law by the Legislature in 1878, Section first makes it unlawful for any person to sell any kind of “articles of traffic or merchandise,” or to erect any place or vehicle for the purpose, within one mile of any camp meeting, with these exceptions:

Nothing in this act shall be taken or so construed as to affect any licensed tavern or hotel keeper, merchant, farmer or shopkeeper in his, her or their usual place of business or residence, nor of any person or persons who shall have procured a permit in writing from the trustees or managers having the charge of management of such camp meeting, specifying the name of the party to whom it is issued and the kind of articles to be offered for sale, and the rules and regulations of such trustees or managers. Provided, that any farmer living within one mile of any such camp meeting shall have the privilege of disposing on his premises of his own farm products or vegetables without such permit.

The penalty for violation of the law is \$100 fine, or six months imprisonment. [The Allentown Democrat – August 15, 1883 – page 3]

As camp meeting became part of the summer routine, reports tapered off but certainly the enthusiasm did not. The summer of 1894 brought some unpleasantness. The newspaper recorded it sometime later.

Not recovered – The team stolen from Mr. Alfred Shaffer, of Upper Saucon, at the Chestnut Hill Camp Meeting some weeks ago, has not yet been recovered, and the chances in his favor to such an end are quite slim now. He has not given up the effort, and offers a \$50 reward for the animal, and \$10 additional for the buggy. [The Allentown Democrat – October 1, 1884 – page 2]

C. H. Brunner indicates that the summer of 1885 brought more permanent structures. He writes, "About the year 1885 a few individual cottages were built by William Gehman, John B. Gehman and Joseph Preisch." [1928 Yearbook]

In 1889, Solomon Eby, the presiding elder from Canada, paid a visit to the camp and shared what he experienced with the readers of the Gospel Banner.

A Visit to Pennsylvania Chestnut Hill Camp-Meeting.

Dear Editor of beloved Banner:

With your permission I will give the readers of the Banner a short report of my visit to Pennsylvania and Chestnut Hill camp-meeting, where by the grace of God I arrived safe, on the 22nd day of August, and found the pilgrims earnestly engaged in prayer, praise and fellowship, and as the hallowed sound was winding its way up to Heaven, my soul was filled with love to God and the brethren and realized with Jacob of old, this is the very gate of Heaven. Glory to

God in the highest, on earth peace, good will to men. Then, after the service was closed, I was kindly received by the brethren, and made acquainted with many who I never had seen before. After many warm greetings, and God bless you, I began to look around me, and behold, I never saw things on Chestnut Hill in this fashion before; seventy-four tents, including the large tabernacle, and hundreds of pilgrims, whose faces shone with joy and gladness, and bright anticipation of a glorious time. Glory to God, the pilgrims were not disappointed. The camp-meeting proved a success from beginning to end. The power of God was manifested more or less in every service. The prominent feature of the meeting were justification, sanctification, and faith healing. Many experienced a change of heart. Christians were sanctified, and the sick were healed by faith in Jesus. Eighteen were baptized (by immersion of course) and came up out of the water shouting. One sister fell under the power of God after she got to the shore. She was then taken on the carriage and driven 2 ½ miles, which did not bring her to consciousness of this world, but the next day she was as nappy (happy?) as an angel. Praise and glory to the God of Abraham.

On Wednesday afternoon, the 28th, the camp-meeting was brought to a close by forming a ring and bidding farewell. Many tears of love and gratitude were shed, while giving the parting hand; quite likely with many never to meet again in this world. Then after this was done perhaps for the last time in this life, we came around the altar once more and a parting prayer was offered up to God to keep us from the evil of this world, and bring us safe home to Jesus. Then the bell was rung, which meant, take down your tents, and move home. [Gospel Banner - September 15, 1889 - page 12]

1890 brought another of those events which would not show up in any reports but would be of interest to newspaper readers. It offers more of the color in the background of these events.

Runaway. – On Monday night a week while Mr. and Mrs. Morris Erdman of Emaus, were returning from the Chestnut Hill camp meeting, the horse attached to their buggy became frightened, and a runaway ensued. The happening took place on the Lehigh mountain, on the road leading from Limeport to Emaus, and was caused by the breaking of the spindle of one of the fore wheels. Mr. E. was tossed out of the vehicle, and was thrown in such a way that he lost his hold on the lines. The horse was thrown into great fright, and at once started into a furious runaway down the hill. Mrs. Erdman, who was still in the buggy, with great presence of mind jumped out of it from behind, and like her husband escaped unhurt. The latter soon came running up to her, and together they then

proceeded homeward on foot. The horse in running away broke one of his hind legs soon after leaving the place of the accident by bringing it in contact with the broken axle but kept going a distance of nearly a mile, when he dropped into a gully on the roadside, near Peter Wagner's. The injury being an unhealable one, the poor beast was killed on the spot to relieve it of its sufferings. The buggy was also badly damaged. It is believed that the accident was owing to a strain the spindle received by a slight collision with another vehicle on the camp ground. The horse was a very fine one, valued at \$250. [The Allentown Democrat – September 3, 1890 – page 2]

The Allentown paper recorded another event in 1891 which must have been somewhat of a setback.

A Tabernacle Burned

The Mennonite tabernacle, a large tent pitched at Zion's Hill, in Lower Milford, Lehigh County, was burned on Sunday night, together with 100 camp stools. The tent of Mrs. Jonas Musselman was also burned. The fire was the work of an incendiary. The matter is being investigated. [The Morning Call – May 21, 1891 – page 4]

Camp meeting had become such a success and part of the ministry of the church, it was perhaps to be expected that expansion would follow. Another was held in 1892 in Royersford. 1893 brought camp meetings to Spring City and Catasaqua. In the following years, camp meetings were held at Quakertown, Macungie, Northampton, Neffsville, Reading, Wescoesville, Hellertown and even more. In 1900- 1904, a camp meeting was held in Macungie. An Allentown newspaper reported on it.

Camp Meeting Opened Today Near Macungie

The Mennonite Brethren have leased Lewis Meckley's grove above Macungie for five years for the purpose of holding campmeetings. They dug a well there and succeeded in getting plenty of good water. This year's campmeeting will commence on Saturday, Aug. 25. It used to be held at Chestnut Hill. It will continue until Sunday night, Sept. 2. Presiding Elder C. H. Brunner has charge.

Services – At 5, 9, and 10 A. M. and 2, 3, 6.30 and 8 P. M. Children's meeting at 1:30 P. M. The Sunday Schools of the the district will meet on the camp

grounds, Saturday, Sept. 1, at 1:30 P. M., when a general children's meeting will be hld. A number of speakers will address the Sunday Schools.

A large number of speakers from various places will be present. Among them will be Rev. A. E. Funk, of New York, Secretary of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. He made a tour around the world last year. Rev. H. S. Hallman, editor of the Gospel Banner, of Berlin, Ontario, Canada, will attend.

Gospel Workers' Day – A number of Gospel Workers in full uniform will be present on Thursday next. The whole day will be given to them, and the services will be in charge of the President W. P. [B.] Musselman, of Williamsport.

Themes – “Salvation through Christ,” “The Holy Spirit and our deeper life in Christ,” “The second coming of Christ and our preparation for it,” “The Evangelization of the World and our part in it.” [Daily City Item, Allentown, PA., Saturday, August 25, 1900, page 1.]

C. H. Brunner notes in his 1928 recollections,

Camp Meetings were held on Chestnut Hill annually for 18 years, the last one being held in 1897. The work was spreading. By this time twelve Camp Meetings had been held at seven other places, many of which were more convenient of access. Although “The Old Camp Ground” had become a sacred spot to many yet it was wise to spread out into other sections of the country.

Up to the present time our records show that the Pennsylvania Conference has held 132 Camp Meetings in different places. In 1910 Mizpah Grove was opened. [1928 Yearbook]

From 1897, camp meetings were held at different locations probably with the intention of making it easier. Perhaps it was also thought that a more local meeting would draw more people from the area where the camp meeting was held. During several years, as many as 4 separate camp meetings were held in four separate locations.

The demands and expectations of holding multiple camp meetings at multiple sites had begun to take a toll. On October 18, 1909, the Annual Conference made its move. “**Resolved**, That the Executive Board be authorized to purchase land or property for Camp Meeting purposes.” [Annual Conference Minutes, 1909] Chestnut Hill gave way to Mizpah Grove in Allentown and Edgewood Grove in Shamokin. Part 2 of our story of camp meeting will be the next edition.



Reading Camp Meeting - meetings held in 1903, 1906, and 1907

The following picture, also of Reading Camp Meeting can be dated more precisely to 1907.

C. H. Brunner and his wife are in the picture. C. H. began serving at Reading in 1907.



Camp Meeting will be on the agenda of the next edition of this publication.

Questions, comments and observations are welcomed.

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