

Back in the Country...

Bell Acres Stories

By Debby Rabold

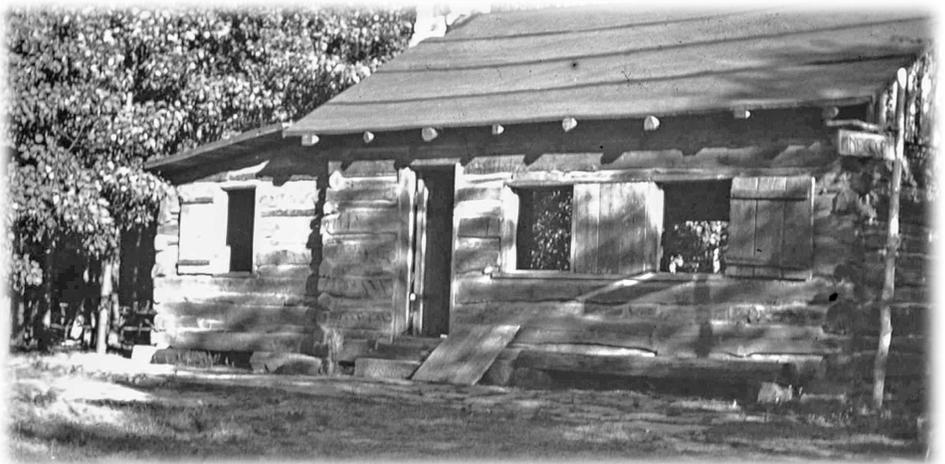
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Mount Sewickley Camp Meeting (1868-1963)

The area's pioneer churches grew from America's Second Great Awakening, the evangelical Protestant movement that dominated our nation during the first half of the 19th century. It was a time when itinerant ministers travelled the frontier in search of converts.

Rev. Thomas McClelland (1763-1820) was the first Methodist minister to preach in the Sewickley Valley. Circa 1811, he purchased a farm on Big Sewickley Creek where neighbors gathered in his home for services. Following his death, the congregation organized the Hopkins Chapel (1844), built on a bluff overlooking Big Sewickley Creek on what is now Hopkins Church Road.

The sturdy red brick chapel was named in honor of Rev. Robert Hopkins (1798-1891). Before settling in Sewickley, most of this beloved minister's career was that of an itinerant. *Some of his fields of labor embraced vast stretches of territory requiring hundreds of miles of travel, mostly on horseback the climbing of mountains, threading of forests, swimming of swollen streams, and lodging in rude cabins. That was the heroic age of Methodism west of the Allegheny Mountains...*from Agnes Ellis' **Lights and Shadows of Sewickley Life**

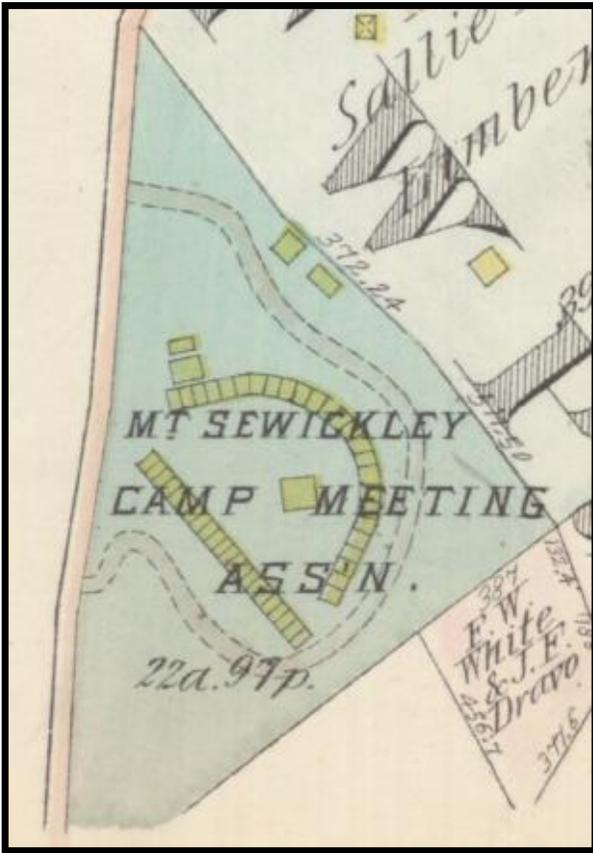


The McClelland log home was rebuilt on the hillside below Young Road when Big Sewickley Creek Road was improved in the 1920s.

Travelling circuits of hundreds of miles, itinerants preached in homes, barns and the open air. Revivals and camp meetings became popular venues where hundreds would gather for a week or more of sermons, prayer and hymn singing.

Perhaps with encouragement from his uncle, a well-known revivalist, James and Susan Wakefield opened their farm to a camp meeting in September 1843 during the circuit's quarterly meeting. *To this meeting people came by scores and hundreds. The campground was located near the present [Wilvan Lane in Franklin Park]. Out of this venture grew the Mt. Sewickley Camp Meeting. [I]t should be related that Mr. Wakefield had to withdraw the use of his property as a camp meeting ground because the worshippers and alleged worshippers tore down the barn for firewood. This was the end of the Wakefield camp meeting. One of the young vandals who did this tried a similar feat at the old Franklin log church (Ingomar Methodist), but the preacher caught him in the act and lit into him with his fists and administered a sound thrashing.* [Rev. Hodge Eagleson 1937]

In 1868, a group of Methodists from Sewickley and Allegheny City purchased twenty-three acres in Sewickley Township for use as a summer camp meeting ground. One Pittsburgh newspaper offered the following description: *This beautiful grove is in the neighborhood of Sewickley about one and a half miles from Leetsdale Station. It is located on an elevated plateau of ground, and very well shaded. Its proximity to the cozy town of Sewickley, one of the delightful places which lie near our city, has helped to swell the tide of humanity which have been attracted to the "tented grove."*



Canvas tents were soon replaced with cottages that could be rented for the season. In fact, some families spent the summer months living at the camp, while husbands and fathers commuted to city jobs via the nearby railroad. As many as three hotels, a store and seventy-three cottages once stood on the property.

Inside the circle of cottages stood the chapel that could accommodate 300 to 400 persons. When not attending religious services, campers enjoyed a variety of entertainment and recreational activities.

[E]ver since noon yesterday the visitors have been pouring in. The excursion trains both up and down were literally packed with men, women and children. Your correspondent stood at the entrance gate from 8:00 to 10 and during that time there was one continued line of vehicles carrying the throngs to the grounds. The inhabitants for miles around seem to be possessed of an irresistible desire to attend the meeting today and it is really amusing to notice the conveyances of every description which were pressed into service for the occasion. Thus, the vehicles came, for hour after hour, wending their way as speedily as possible to the camp.

Of the crowd on the ground I can say that it was simply immense, and for the five or six years that meetings have been held here, no day ever exceeded this one in the number of visitors. It would be difficult to give the actual number, but from tickets taken at the gate, and personal observation, it would not be an over-estimate to place the number at 4,000...

The hotels or boarding houses were pretty well filled as early as yesterday noon, and at noon today it was with difficulty that a meal could be secured, so immense was the crowd. A bed is one of the most difficult things to get...

This morning opened brightly and Nature seemed striving to do all in her power to make this an auspicious day, and she succeeded beautifully, for with the sun's rays came gently breezes...the only disagreeable feature of the day was the abundance of dust which followed in huge clouds in the wake of every conveyance, blinding the poor souls who unfortunately were in the rear.

The singing today was splendid. We had a good choir, a combination of many church choirs...

[Pittsburgh Daily Gazette 23 August 1875]



Mt. Sewickley

is a delightful place to spend a day or your entire vacation. Just fourteen miles west of Pittsburgh on the Ft. Wayne Railroad. One mile from Leetsdale Station. ∴ ∴

Undated post card showing camp ground entrance.



Undated photo of what is thought to be the camp ground.

Summer Homes Swept by Fire at Mt. Sewickley

Sixteen families were readjusting themselves today at the site of the Camp Meeting Association of Mt. Sewickley on the Leetsdale Road (Camp Meeting Road) after fire destroyed 19 two-story wooden summer cottages there late yesterday.

The camp was established 70 years ago by Ohio Valley members of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Yearly since then it has been the site of concentrated religious summer camp meetings.

In the early days those attending the meetings were quartered in tents. The buildings that were destroyed yesterday were all alike and erected approximately 60 years ago...

Fire Broke Out

The fire broke out in an unoccupied cottage in the middle of a row of buildings, set a scant yard apart. It quickly raced toward both ends, and many campers lost all their possessions...

Spread Rapidly

The fire spread through the 60-year-old houses rapidly. Efforts of the campers to check the blaze with a bucket brigade were hopeless.

The fire leaped from building to building, driving out the hastily organized rescue crews, who endeavored to save the property of fellow campers.

The camp has no fire-fighting equipment, and a lack of water hampered the volunteer firemen summoned from nearby towns. The water which eventually checked the fire was pumped from the cistern of the D. T. Watson Home for Crippled Children, across the road.

\$15,000 Damage

The damage was estimated at \$15,000 by Fire Chief John A. Weber of Fair Oaks. Other companies fighting the fire included Leetsdale, Sewickley and Ambridge.

The Tabernacle, the administrative building and 23 cottages were saved from the flames. Old timers at the camp said this is the third fire that the camp has had since it was constructed. There were originally 73 cottages, now there are only 23. The others destroyed were never rebuilt.

16 Families Homeless

The 16 families made homeless were taken care of in various ways. Several moved into empty cottages, some moved in with friends and others returned to their regular homes... [Ten of the burned cottages were privately owned and nine belonged to the association.]

[Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph Wednesday 10 August 1938]





By the 1950s, services had become inter-denominational and limited to Sundays. No longer able to maintain the property, the camp meeting association dissolved in 1963 with a par 3 golf course opening on the property two years later. The golf course was replaced by the Olde Sewickley Highlands subdivision in 1985.

1939 aerial photo showing the D.T. Watson facility (left) and the Mount Sewickley Camp Meeting (right) on Camp Meeting Road.



Aerial view of Olde Sewickley Highlands (right) and the D.T. Watson facility (left).