

Campground Remembered as Place For Reunion, Worship

by Shirley Hunter
Managing Editor

Nestled between the tall pines and small, scattered neighborhoods in eastern Lincoln County, N.C., stands a site that few would recognize as historic landmark. The rows of weathered cabin-like "tents" melded together by a few rusty nails look as if they should have been condemned years ago. The sawdust that covers the ground like a thick, plush carpet, holds memories for a selected few. The concession stands, empty now, but with crushed and dirty snowcone containers and gum wrappers strewn nearby, only look like shells.

But during the last two weeks of August, everything comes to life here at Tucker's Grove Campground. It has served as a religious and social outlet for blacks since 1868. Until then, black and white Methodists in the surrounding area worshipped and held revival services together.

The tradition of holding revival services under a wooden structure known as an arbor, dates back to 1794 when a Methodist minister held a revival meeting under a tent. After that year, it is said that a spiritual awakening occurred in Lincoln County, and the revivals became an annual event. From then on, people are said to have come near and far to worship and be converted under the then cloth tents.

In 1868, when the blacks branched off from the predominantly white Rock Springs Campground, also in Lincoln County, a popular social and religious event was initiated. Each day during the two-week campmeeting, night services are conducted by different ministers. Massive choirs accompanying each minister sing anything from the tried and true old negro spirituals, to new inspirational songs. The splintery wooden pews are primitive reminders of past campmeetings when blacks just freed from slavery would jump and shout the house down. Now, those who come decked out in their Sunday best, pay no mind to the inconvenience and hardness of the benches. They just come to have a good time and worship with friends and relatives.

Over the years, the Campground has also become somewhat of a gigantic family reunion where people sleep over. The wooden tents, some well over 100 years old, are put together by wooden pegs and are home away

from home for many people. Area residents bring stoves, beds, chairs, couches and other furniture to help make their stay in them more pleasant and convenient. Furnishings in the tents range from the barely decorated and reminiscent of the early days, to the nouveau riche with paper on the walls and plush carpet covering the floors. Most people, however, just bring the essentials for their stay at the campground, choosing to imitate the lifestyle of their ancestors as much as possible.

Much social activity accompanies the religious function. After arbor services are finished each night, people gather in the dusty mid-section to catch up on the activities of old classmates or to renew old kinship ties. Around 9:30 p.m., the aisles between the tents are spotlighted by a yellow glow cast by lights on the vending carts. The vendors shout, "Get your hotdogs, here," while children play games with their friends and their parents reminisce with old high school chums.

On Big Saturday and Big Sunday, the last two days, the Campground is the center of activity for many blacks in the Piedmont area. Rows and rows of cars line each side of the road for at least one-fourth of a mile. Friends and relatives from as far away as Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Canada come, they say, to visit for a special weekend of giving thanks to God and for friends and family.

Hattie Mae Graham, a native of Mt. Holly, N.C., comes to the Campground annually for those very reasons. "Here you meet good friends, and hear good preachin'—old-time preachin,'" she said. She said it was like a vacation when she visited.

Nostalgia also brings many to the Campground. In the mid-section, where sometimes as many as 1,000 people have been known to gather, bellows of laughter and guffaws accompany the tall tales told by friends seeing each other for the first time in 10 years. Cousins find joy in remembrance of past times when life was simpler. Children with dripping ice cream cones grasped in wet, sticky hands, run blindly around parent's coattails playing tag games and yelling, "Mommy, tell him to stop chasing me," while giggling hysterically.

But the Campground is not just for very young or old, either. Teenagers and young adults often

come, especially on Big Saturday and Sunday. Dances are planned and local high school football heroes come to show off school colors.

The Campground is especially a popular hangout after the first football practice of the season. Players from different schools come to boast of what they hope will be a winning season. Also, the Campground has been known to aid in matchmaking.

Even with this variety of activities, Tucker's Grove Campground may seem a bit country to some, and unsophisticated to others. After all, the sawdust and the outdoorsy atmosphere takes some getting used to. But, to others it is a place where time has stood still.

To Ernest Graham, also of Mt. Holly, it is a place where church and family are still the most important things in life. Graham, who has been attending camp-meetings for over 50 years, said, "It's a place just to have a good time."

Tucker's Grove Campground is not the only religious campground existing in North Carolina. A few others still exist, such as Popular Springs in Lincoln County and McKenzies in Catawba County, but many have faded with the passage of time. Most sprung up as a response to the spiritual awakening of the late 1700s and 1800s. According to, *And They All Sang Hallelujah*, by Dickson D. Bruce Jr., they were in direct response to frontier conditions which made it impossible for blacks to afford to build churches. So, the open-air wooden arbors was substituted. According to Bruce, the campaign or tenting practices began when the slaves from surrounding areas heard about ministers preaching great revival messages in wooden arbors and decided to camp out to hear the messages each night.

In the book, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, by Albert J. Raboteau, slaves enjoyed the campmeetings. To them, it was a time not only to be spiritually revived, but to be together. In the book an ex-slave, Charlie Aarons, says, "there would be camp-meetings held and the slaves from all the surrounding plantations would attend, going . . . in these large wagons . . . They would have a jolly time along the way, singing and calling to one another, and making friends."

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have been one dimensional too long."

Minorities need the opportunity to get into the industry, whether they succeed or fail, he said.

"Every minority person isn't going to be successful," Fitzpatrick said. "Every minority person isn't going to be a superstar and this is where another problem arises."

Fitzpatrick said that most editors miss a lot of good talent because they say they want nothing but the best. "When envisioning the best, sometimes we overlook great potential."

"The inevitable is here," he said. "We're not going away."

Fitzpatrick said that 30 years ago when he started in the business, he was the first black in a building of 600 people. Now he is the director of minority affairs for Knight-Ridder News.

"We as professionals need to know how to deal with the inevitable," he said.

"We have a role to play in this business," he told the editors.

"The greatest tragedy we can create when we leave this conference is to leave these young people with hope and nothing else. Don't leave them hanging. You can't lose if you make a wise selection."

Laurie Denise Willis, editor, holds weekly office hours from 4:00-5:00 on Mondays in room 220B Upendo Lounge and 12:30-1:30 on Tuesdays in the BSM office. Please feel free to come by if you have suggestions for the *Ink*, article ideas, would like to join the staff or just to talk. If these times are not convenient for you, just give Laurie a call (933-3277) to set one up. Have a great semester and please continue reading the *Black Ink*!

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and Writers are
encouraged to join
The Black Ink staff.**