

A Good and Profitable Occasion: The Story of Acton Camp Ground

*Sylvia C. Henricks**

About fifteen miles southeast of Indianapolis is a quiet meadow at the corner of Southport and Acton roads. It is a part of what was once the large Acton Camp Ground, used from 1859 to 1905. Nothing now marks the site except the remains of an earthen dam, which changed a small stream into a lake for the campers. A few elderly residents of the community remember the camp ground, but for the most part, its illustrious past is forgotten.

Acton Camp Ground resulted from the efforts of fourteen Methodists, six ministers and eight laymen, who met on June 16, 1859, in a grove of trees near London in Shelby County.¹ The Indianapolis District of the South-East Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church, to which their churches belonged, had never had a camp ground although camp meetings had long been a vital part of their Methodist heritage.² The men felt confident of the success of such a venture. Their denomination was the largest in the state.³ The farmers' increased prosperity, and even leisure, as machinery began to take over some of their more arduous work, seemed to indicate that there would be both adequate financial support and participation. Roads were being improved, and the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Railroad opened in 1853 would provide easy access to a camp ground located along its line.⁴ The men decided to form an association, buy land, and begin development of a camp ground. They established one committee to formulate a constitution and articles of the association and another to look for a suitable location.

At the second meeting on June 23, 1859, attendance was larger. Twenty-four people were present with more churches represented, including Roberts Chapel and Asbury in Indianapolis, the Southport, London, and Palestine circuits, and the Shelbyville Station. The site committee had found a forty acre tract "adjoining Farmersville," the original name of Acton; they could purchase twenty acres from the

* Sylvia C. Henricks is an assistant in the Indiana Central College Library, Indianapolis.

¹ *Acton Lectures, 1881: Lectures and Sermons Delivered In the Pavilion at Acton Camp Ground, Acton, Indiana, August 1st to 10th, 1881, under the Auspices of the Camp-Meeting Association* (Indianapolis, 1881), 4. The first twenty pages of this pamphlet comprise a history of the Acton Camp Meeting Association and a copy of its constitution and by laws. Unless otherwise noted, information about the camp ground to 1881 is from this pamphlet.

² Herbert L. Heller, *Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church, 1832-1956* [Greencastle, Indiana, 1956], 206.

³ Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis, 1965), 599.

⁴ Ared M. Murphy, "The Big Four Railroad in Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XXI (June and September, 1925), 178.

Reverend John V. R. Miller for \$35 an acre. The twenty additional acres could be bought later.⁵

The committee on the constitution and articles of the association also had its report ready. The objects of the association were defined in the first and second articles of the constitution.

"This association shall be denominated the INDIANAPOLIS DISTRICT CAMP-MEETING ASSOCIATION OF THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH."

"The object of this association shall be to purchase, improve and hold a tract of land in the vicinity of Acton, for camp-meeting purposes, Sunday school celebrations, and other meetings of a strictly moral and religious character."

... "the members of the association shall be the tent-holders, the pastors (including the presiding elders, the preachers in charge, and the assistant preachers) of the several charges represented, and of all other members of the church who shall sign this constitution."⁶

The constitution was said to assure "a Methodist camp-meeting, controlled by Methodists alone."⁷ It provided for officers and five trustees. The officers elected were F. C. Holliday, president; William Hacker, vice president; Alexander Worth, treasurer; and J. J. Dumont, secretary.

Eager to see the proposed site of their new camp ground, the association met at the Acton location on July 14. There they elected as trustees Alexander Worth, William Hannaman, James Brenton, Thomas Wray, and William Hacker, who were authorized to complete the purchase. A previously appointed subscription committee had raised \$860 to pay for the land and improvements. Anxious to use the land immediately the association directed the trustees to prepare for the first camp meeting on August 29.⁸ There was "a respectable number of tent-holders" that first year. Subscriptions and collections taken during the meeting brought in \$1,050. This was a sizable sum but it was short of the \$1,500 that had been spent by the association.

The constitution gave the association the authority to meet each year to elect the officers and trustees, and to decide if, when, and how long camp meeting was to be held.⁹ On April 24, 1860, the association

⁵ The remaining land was purchased sometime before 1881.

⁶ *Acton Lectures, 1881*, 4-5. Tent holders were members of participating Methodist churches who by their rental of a tent or space on the camp ground had one vote per family in the association. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ The trustees were to hold in trust "all the property, real and personal, of the association"; to "make fences and other improvements," to schedule camp meetings of the various churches represented in the association; to see that no improper amusements were allowed on the grounds; to oversee the management of boarding tents; and to employ a police force to preserve order. *Acton Lectures, 1881*, 18-19.

⁹ Around 1874 the constitution was amended to include in the officers of the association a Camp-Meeting Committee, which elected the trustees annually and the other officers "from time to time," determined "from year to year the question of holding a camp-meeting," and was "charged with the responsibility of arranging for the same" *Acton Lectures, 1881*, 17.

met at the camp ground and decided to have a camp meeting begin on August 16 and extend over two Sundays "‘if the interest justified.’" The suggestion was made that the Friday before the meeting should be a day of fasting and prayer "‘for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the meeting.’"¹⁰ But as a precaution, at the July 16 business meeting the association authorized the trustees to employ two policemen to keep order during the camp meeting. At this meeting officers for the year were elected, although the election of trustees was deferred. At the business meeting held during the camp meeting the treasurer reported he had spent \$1,972.12—\$22.64 more than his income. The history reports that attendance was fair.

After a spring meeting in 1861 at which association officers were elected, the camp meeting met August 15, 1861, and was held over two Sundays. It was considered "‘a glorious success’" with about fifty souls being converted. There were large crowds during the week days, good order was maintained, and there was much effective preaching. Collections totalling \$107 were received from those who attended.

Meetings were also held in 1862 and 1863, but they were not considered successful because people were too distraught by the Civil War. In preparation for the late summer meeting of 1863 necessary repairs were made to the grounds which included rebuilding the preacher's tent and the pavilion which had been destroyed by fire. The record notes that at that fifth camp "meeting there was considerable disturbance from ungodly roughs, which caused uneasiness and a sense of insecurity among the tent holders, and led the Trustees to take summary means for safety. It was again demonstrated that when the sons of God came together, satan came also."¹¹

The summer of 1864 was a time of mounting tension with doubts concerning the victory of the Union forces and mixed feelings toward Indiana Governor Oliver P. Morton. Rumors of divided loyalties and the discovery of the existence of the subversive Sons of Liberty in Indiana added to the unrest. One writer of the period says that "During the latter part of the summer of 1864, outrages, robberies, and incendiary fires, were of constant occurrence."¹²

The Acton Camp Ground seems to have suffered as a result of this unrest, for on Sunday, August 14, 1864, it was completely burned. The history of the camp meeting association gives this explanation:

Several regiments of troops from Marion and Shelby counties had been hurried into the field, and met with a disastrous defeat at Cumberland Ford, and many

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹² W. H. H. Terrell, *Indiana in the War of the Rebellion* (Indianapolis, 1960), 356.

were wounded. The officers of the Camp-Meeting Association tendered the use of the Acton Camp Grounds, to Governor Morton for hospital purposes, especially for these regiments. This so enraged the enemies of the county that the entire encampment was burned, and the trees destroyed by the intense heat, on the 14th of August, 1864.¹³

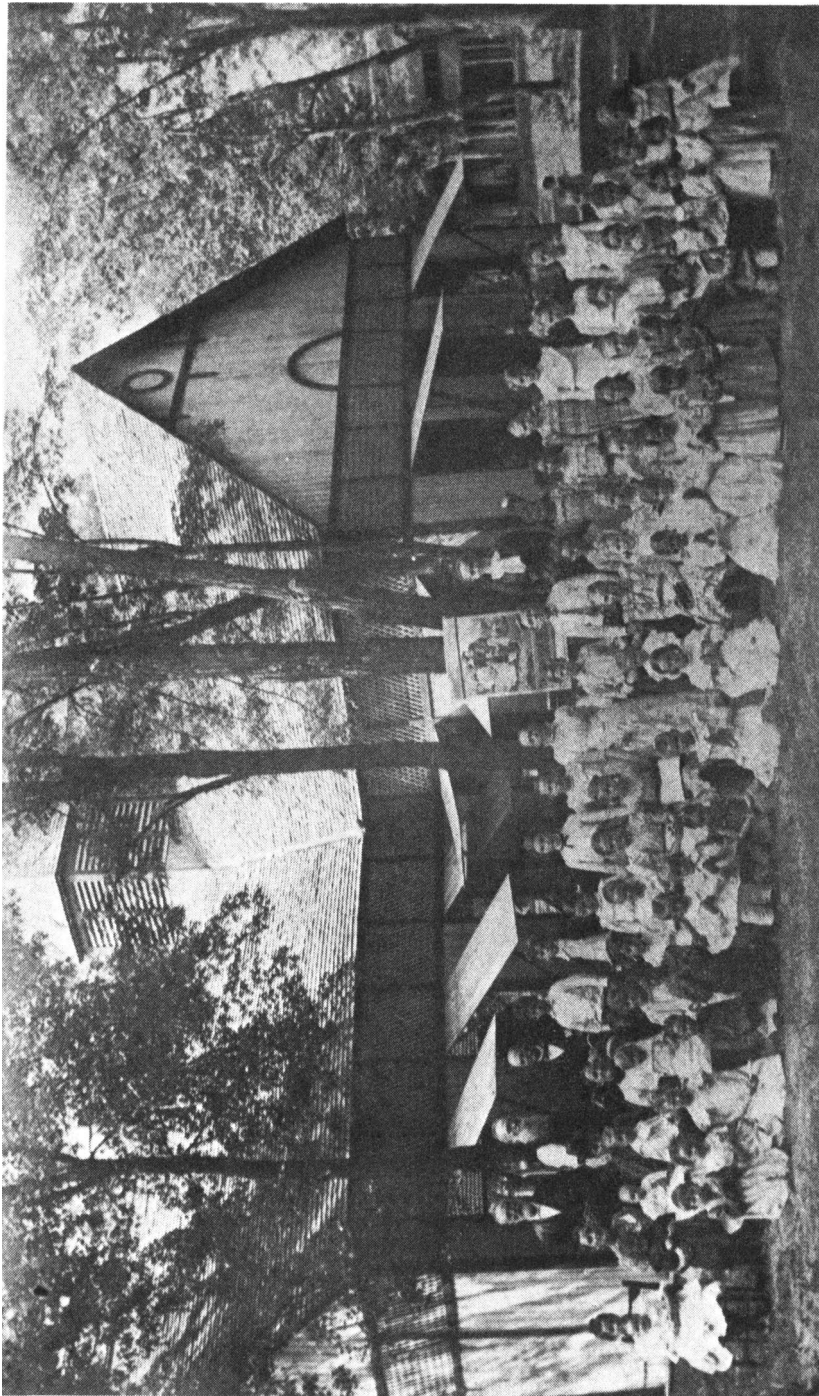
Just who the "enemies of the county" were can only be conjectured, whether enemies of the governor, members of the Sons of Liberty, hostile neighbors, or vandals. The fire may have been accidental and the unsettled times perhaps gave it added significance. However, the rumor of the fire's being set remained, and a later article about the camp ground in the *Indianapolis News* recounts that "The whole camp was burned in the time of the war . . . believed to be due to incendiarism. It had been chosen to be a hospital for the soldiers, and many cottage-holders objected. The whole camp was mysteriously burned."¹⁴

Although the fire had destroyed everything, at the close of the Civil War the Acton Camp Ground entered a period of steady growth. In June, 1865, the association met to decide on the location of new buildings. They had only \$855, which had been received from the insurance on tents and the pavilion. They decided to buy canvas tents rather than board tents which burned so readily. However, the tents could not be received in time, so there was no camp meeting in 1865. The next year army tents were purchased for \$600, and a shed was erected for a pavilion. Camp meeting was held in August, extending over two Sundays, and was "a good and profitable occasion."

In the years after the Civil War the association's most persistent problem seems to have been a disagreement with the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Railroad over what was considered a desecration of the Sabbath: the running of Sunday trains to and from the camp ground. In the early years there had been harmony between the association and the railroad. The camp ground surely could not have enjoyed the importance it did, had it not been located on the railroad line with trains stopping at its gate. On the other hand, the number of people traveling to and from the grounds must have provided the railroad with much revenue. Moreover, in accordance with a verbal agreement between the association and the railroad, Alexander Worth, treasurer both of the Acton Camp-Meeting Association and the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Railroad, added ten cents to the price of a ticket to the camp ground and gave this money to the association. Official recognition of this agreement was made at the 1863 business

¹³ *Acton Lectures, 1881*, 7-8. Research has not fit this incident into the history of the Civil War. The fighting around Cumberland Gap and Cumberland Ford (fourteen miles south of the Gap) did involve Indiana regiments, the thirty-third and forty-ninth, but this happened in 1862, not 1864. The *Indianapolis Sentinel* and *Journal* for the four days following August 14, 1864, contain no mention about the fire at the camp ground.

¹⁴ *Indianapolis News*, July 31, 1899.



PHOTOGRAPH OF THE PAVILION, OR TABERNACLE, AT ACTON CAMP GROUND, c. 1900.

Located in the Claude Brenton Papers.
Provided by Sylvia C. Henricks.

meeting of the association when Worth reported receipts of \$253.35 from the railroad from the sale of tickets. Through the years this ticket money apparently provided the camp ground with an important source of revenue.

Because of its continued indebtedness, the association had no wish to sever financial ties with the railroad, but its increasing concern over the Sunday trains could not be disregarded. In the business meeting of June, 1869, the association resolved by a large vote "That it is the sense of this association, that it is improper to run railroad trains on the Sabbath." ¹⁵ At the camp meeting in August, 1870, a resolution was adopted concerning Sunday trains:

"WHEREAS, God hath commanded us to remember the Sabbath [*sic*] day to keep it holy, and

"WHEREAS, The running of trains to and from the camp ground on the Sabbath day, is not only a clear violation of God's commandment, but is also productive of much evil influence in every community reached by these Sunday trains; therefore,

"Resolved, That a committee of four from each charge represented in this association be appointed to prepare and submit a plan, whereby all funds necessary for the use of this association, may be secured without any partnership on the part of this association, in the proceeds of railroad trains run on the Sabbath day, to the business meeting to be held in May" ¹⁶

In May, 1871, this committee reported and suggested that a group be formed to make "arrangements with the railroad as may result in participation by the association with the road, in the fares of persons attending the camp-meeting, provided no trains be run on the Sabbath." ¹⁷

Around this time Worth resigned as treasurer and retired from his connection with the association. Perhaps he was weary of the whole discussion that seemed to come up at every meeting and appeared insoluble. Even the leaders of the association realized that the discussions were detracting from the spiritual interests of the meetings. On the last day of the camp meeting in 1871 a committee appointed to confer with the railroad reported that the railroad insisted it would run Sunday trains to and from the camp ground. There was much discouragement, and the trustees were given the authority to sell and relocate the camp ground. However, the rescinding of this authority by the association on August 1, 1872, suggests its determination to try to come to some agreement with the railroad.

On August 1, 1873, the Acton Camp-Meeting Association finally entered into a twenty year contract with the Indianapolis, Cincinnati and Lafayette Railroad. ¹⁸ The contract contained eleven points, the

¹⁵ *Acton Lectures*, 1881, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁸ In 1867 the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Railroad merged with the Lafayette

first of which was: "No excursion trains whatever will be run to and from the camp ground on Sundays."¹⁹ During the camping season that year this section of the agreement was observed, but thereafter trains ran again on Sunday, and the agreement was wholly ignored in that respect. In 1881, eight years later, the problem apparently was still unsolved. The association voted to sanction no longer the running of Sunday trains by sharing the profit; after that year they were to refuse the money accruing from the sale of Sunday train tickets.

The railroad, in spite of its refusal to curtail the running of Sunday trains, provided the camp ground with important service in addition to acceptable ticket revenue. The 1873 agreement between the association and the railroad describes special arrangements for campers including the railroad pass that was in use:

The company will have on the camp ground, during camp-meeting occasions, and furnish to one person from each family of tent holders, who shall have procured a return ticket as aforesaid, a free pass that will enable such person . . . to go to his or her home and return with provisions and other necessities for the use of his or her family, but for no other purpose.

. . . The company will carry to and from the camp ground, on any camp-meeting occasion, free of charge, and without unnecessary delay, all cooking utensils, bedding, baggage, provisions, etc., that may be required by the tent-holders for their comfort and convenience.

. . . Such light baggage, bundles, provisions or other packages as is usually carried on passenger trains, may be carried to and from the camp ground with a passenger on such train.

. . . The company will furnish free passes to the members of the camp-meeting committee to attend the annual meeting of the committee at the camp ground.

The railroad was pledged also to schedule "All accommodation passenger trains . . . to stop at the camp grounds during the continuance of the meeting," and to "co-operate with the association so as to prevent, as far as possible, any and all persons from taking intoxicating liquors to the camp ground at any time, and . . . not knowingly carry improper persons to the camp ground." The agreement continued to "allow to the association a royalty of ten cents on each camp-meeting ticket sold." In return, the association pledged to the railroad "company the free use of their camp ground and pavilion for Sunday school picnics and all other moral gatherings."²⁰

and Indianapolis, to form the Indianapolis, Cincinnati and Lafayette Railroad. In 1880 it was sold under foreclosure and reorganized as the Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis and Chicago Railroad, and in 1889 it became part of the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis—or "Big Four"—Railroad. Murphy, "The Big Four Railroad in Indiana," 197, 212, 216.

¹⁹ *Acton Lectures*, 1881, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 11, 10-12.

Two newspaper accounts from August, 1878, give an interesting glimpse of a camp meeting at the Acton Camp Ground. In the first article the reporter speaks of the joys of "life in the woods," and the variety of people in attendance. Summaries of three of the day's sermons are given.²¹ According to the second story early Saturday evening, August 3, the crowds began to arrive. On Sunday even larger crowds were present. There were "Fully 10,000 people . . . on the ground," and there were no disturbances; "interest and zeal" were noted at the 5 A.M. service on Sunday. The 9 A.M. service was "well attended, and many testimonies, fresh and pure from the heart, were given." The Sunday morning sermon was presented at 10 A.M., after which "The dinner hour was the scene of gypsy life on a grand scale." The reporter could not get close enough to hear the main speaker of the afternoon, Dr. Sampson Tincher of Greensburg, so he listened to various other speakers holding services at various places on the grounds. "A fine shower of rain scattered the people at 5 o'clock, when many suddenly desired very much to attend religious services, if we may judge by the rush for the pavilion." The crowd began to disperse in the evening as they had come, on trains and in wagons.²²

With the increased attendance, members of the association addressed their energies to improving the quality of the annual camp meetings. In 1879 they decided to have some literary exercises in connection with the next camp meeting. As a result in August, 1880, three lecturers spoke: Dr. Alexander Martin, a Judge Hagins of Cincinnati, and President Emerson E. White of Purdue University.

This program proved to be such a worthwhile venture that the association arranged to spend the first ten days of the 1881 meeting in a series of "literary and scientific lectures, sermons, Sunday school work and a young men's day."²³ Among the speakers were clergymen, educators, and politicians presenting a variety of subjects including "OUR BOYS WHO SHALL HAVE THEM: THE CHURCH OR THE WORLD?," "MICROSCOPIC GLIMPSES OF GOD AND IMMORTALITY," "CAMP-MEETINGS OF THE OLDEN TIMES," and "LAND OF THOR: OR, A JOURNEY THROUGH NORWAY."²⁴

Although no written history is available for the years after 1881, there is no doubt that the Acton Camp Ground flourished for the next two decades. Such records as there are indicate a large number of people in attendance at camp meetings, "as many as forty thousand people having sometimes been present in a single day."²⁵ Three lists of cottages and owners record between 120 and 140 cottage holders,

²¹ *Indianapolis Journal*, August 3, 1878.

²² *Ibid.*, August 5, 1878.

²³ *Acton Lectures*, 1881, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.* These lectures were among those printed in this pamphlet.

²⁵ B. R. Sulgrove, *History of Indianapolis and Marion County* (Philadelphia, 1884), 527.

coming from over twenty different Indiana towns, including Franklin, Shelbyville, Greensburg, Rushville, and Hope, and from as far away as Chicago, Illinois, and Hamilton, Ohio.²⁶

The camp ground was easily accessible by train; five trains a day, three westbound, two eastbound stopped at the main gate on Southport Road.²⁷ After 1902 many people could come on the inter-urban, a transportation system which was the extension of the city streetcar lines to neighboring cities.²⁸ According to residents of the area the Indianapolis and Shelbyville Traction Company, a division of the Indianapolis and Cincinnati Traction Company, had a "Y" turnoff into the camp ground and a station there. The summer rate to the grounds was twenty-five cents round trip from either Indianapolis or Shelbyville.²⁹ However, the horse and buggy was still the standard means of travel. Mrs. Rachel Pfendler remembers her father-in-law telling how he lined up in his buggy for an hour waiting to be admitted to the camp ground.³⁰ A few residents of the community remember the dust that lay several inches thick in the wagon tracks. But in spite of the dust and the waiting it was a pleasant outing for families to take a picnic basket and spend the day at the camp ground. Horses were unhitched and fastened to trees on the east side of the grounds. Families attended the morning and afternoon programs and enjoyed a noon picnic in the shade of the big trees. Admission to the grounds was only ten cents, with children under twelve admitted free.³¹

A lake for enjoyment and fire protection was created on the camp ground around 1900 by damming a small stream that wound through the eastern part of the grounds. In 1881 a committee had been appointed to investigate the possibility of building a lake. A handwritten list in the Claude Brenton Papers indicates that in 1898 a group of forty-eight cottage holders agreed to subscribe \$250 for the construction of a lake. Will Maze of Acton remembers the lake as large enough for boats and canoes; one end of it was crossed by a bridge which took traffic entering the camp ground on Acton Road to the main buildings which fronted on Southport Road.³²

²⁶ Papers on the Acton Camp Ground from the period 1885-1900 including records, lists of cottage holders, a photograph of the pavilion, and the printed and framed "Rules for the Government of the Acton Park Asso'n" were loaned to the author by Claude Brenton, formerly of Acton, Indiana, now of Dunedin, Florida.

²⁷ *Acton Chautauqua*, July 22-August 10, 1904.

²⁸ Logan Esarey, *A History of Indiana from 1850 to 1920*, (2 vols., Fort Wayne, 1924), II, 1044.

²⁹ *Acton Chautauqua*, July 26-August 15, 1905.

³⁰ Interview with Mrs. Rachel Pfendler, Pleasant View, Indiana, February 5, 1968.

³¹ A single ticket for one week was twenty-five cents; a single ticket during the season was fifty cents. "Rules for the government of the Acton Camp Meeting Association." This is a handwritten undated document. Brenton Papers.

³² Interview with Will Maze, Acton, Indiana, October 26, 1967.

Cottagers did not reside at the camp ground only at times of camp meetings. The 1904 chautauqua account states that "Twenty-five families were in their cottages at Acton Park in the month of May. Many of these, and others, will remain till the frost is on the pumpkin. It is a delightful summer resort and living is cheap, having access to city and country."³³ The camper usually built his own cottage on a lot which he rented by the year from the camp meeting association. A receipt, dated July 25, 1895, shows that E. H. Rogers paid \$4 for rent of "Tent No. 82." Cottage ownership could also be changed: George W. Gadd on August 28, 1894, purchased for \$15 "Cottage No 168 and contents" from E. L. Dolph, Lawrenceburg, Indiana. According to the lists of tent holders two cottages were reserved for the railroad, one each for the Women's Home Mission Society and the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and two for the Junior Epworthians. An 1895 list of cottages for tax appraisal valued them from \$15 to \$250; the great majority were valued at \$50 or less. The camp ground itself was appraised at \$970.³⁴

A description of the cottages must be put together piecemeal. A newspaper account in 1899 indicates that some had two stories and were lined in some instances with canvas or heavy cardboard.³⁵ They were probably similar to those of the same period at the Deputy Camp Ground, Jefferson County, Indiana:

. . . Always called 'tents,' these were actually permanent, rough-finished board cottages, with a lean-to kitchen back of a living room, and with attic sleeping places. . . .

The cottages were white-washed, and the custom of experienced campers was to line the rough interior of the living room—ceiling and walls—with white sheets tacked and pinned quickly into place. Though it sounds like a singularly impractical idea for camping, it actually was cozy. Tack marks in the hems of ancient bed linen called for no explanation; anyone would know they were 'Camp Meeting' sheets.³⁶

Gasoline stoves were used for cooking and provided a constant danger of fire or injury. Mrs. Rommie Hayworth of Acton remembers baby-sitting as a young girl for a cottage holder and being burned trying

³³ *Acton Chautauqua, July 22-August 10, 1904.*

³⁴ "Appraisement for 1895 Taxes." This is a typewritten list with handwritten notations of addresses, corrected names, and amounts of money paid. There are 140 tents appraised with numbers between 1 and 302. Brenton Papers.

³⁵ *Indianapolis News*, July 31, 1899.

³⁶ Heller, *Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church, 1832-1956*, 213-14. A handwritten document in the camp ground records indicates that "tent means permanent wood or brick structure & not a cloth tent or temporary bldg." The six page document is dated May 2, 1882, at the top of page one and mentions various other dates, the latest of which is August 1, 1893. It appears to be sketchy records of several years and lists constitutional articles and by laws, with occasional marginal notes of amendment. In the margins also are page references to some source—presumably a more complete record—which has not been located. This source is later referred to as Camp Ground Record, 1882. Brenton Papers.

to light the stove.³⁷ The 1899 newspaper account describes a fire which was started by a leaking gasoline stove that flared when lit. Only a few people were up at 5:30 A.M. when the fire started and there was panic at first. But villagers came from Acton to help and the campers threw wet blankets and bedding over porches and roofs of nearby cottages to keep the fire from spreading. They put ropes to one cottage in the path of the fire and pulled it down. Eight cottages were burned in this, the only known fire that occurred during an encampment.³⁸

Food preparation and garbage disposal were in keeping with the times. There was no refrigeration; so there were daily calls to the camp ground by nearby farmers or their wives. Several residents of the community remember going as children to help sell eggs, butter, cheese, and vegetables to the cottagers. The butcher wagon came twice a week from Acton and the butcher sliced bacon, ham, and steak to order on a block fastened to the back of his wagon. Live chickens were sold and many cottagers had a small pen where they could fatten a chicken before killing it. The superintendent of the grounds had a large garden and his wife sold fresh vegetables and milk.³⁹ One item on a printed list of rules for campers told how refuse was to be taken care of:

No filth or garbage shall be thrown upon the ground, but shall be emptied in the slop barrels provided: chamber slops must be emptied in privies; broken glass and uneatable things must not be put in barrels with kitchen slops, but emptied in boxes to be hauled away, as the contents of slop barrels are hauled away every day and fed to hogs. Put only such things in slop barrels as a hog can eat.⁴⁰

Disposal methods were primitive, but the ubiquitous hog, which has played such a vital part in Indiana economy, was profitably utilized.

There was a grocery and provision stand on the camp ground, as well as "barber shops and stores." These were "closed on Sunday, and the lunch stands allowed to sell only such articles as are cooked for eating, and tea, coffee or lemonade."⁴¹ Meals and lodging could be purchased at a hotel, a two story frame structure with a porch around it. It was operated by the Ladies' Auxiliary which guaranteed "its good order, cleanliness and efficient management." Daily meals were twenty-five cents and Sunday dinner was thirty-five cents. Board and room at the hotel was \$1 per day or \$6 per week. A room was fifty cents, and twenty-one meals by ticket were \$4.⁴² "*Chicken*

³⁷ Interview with Mrs. Rommie Hayworth, Acton, Indiana, November 10, 1967.

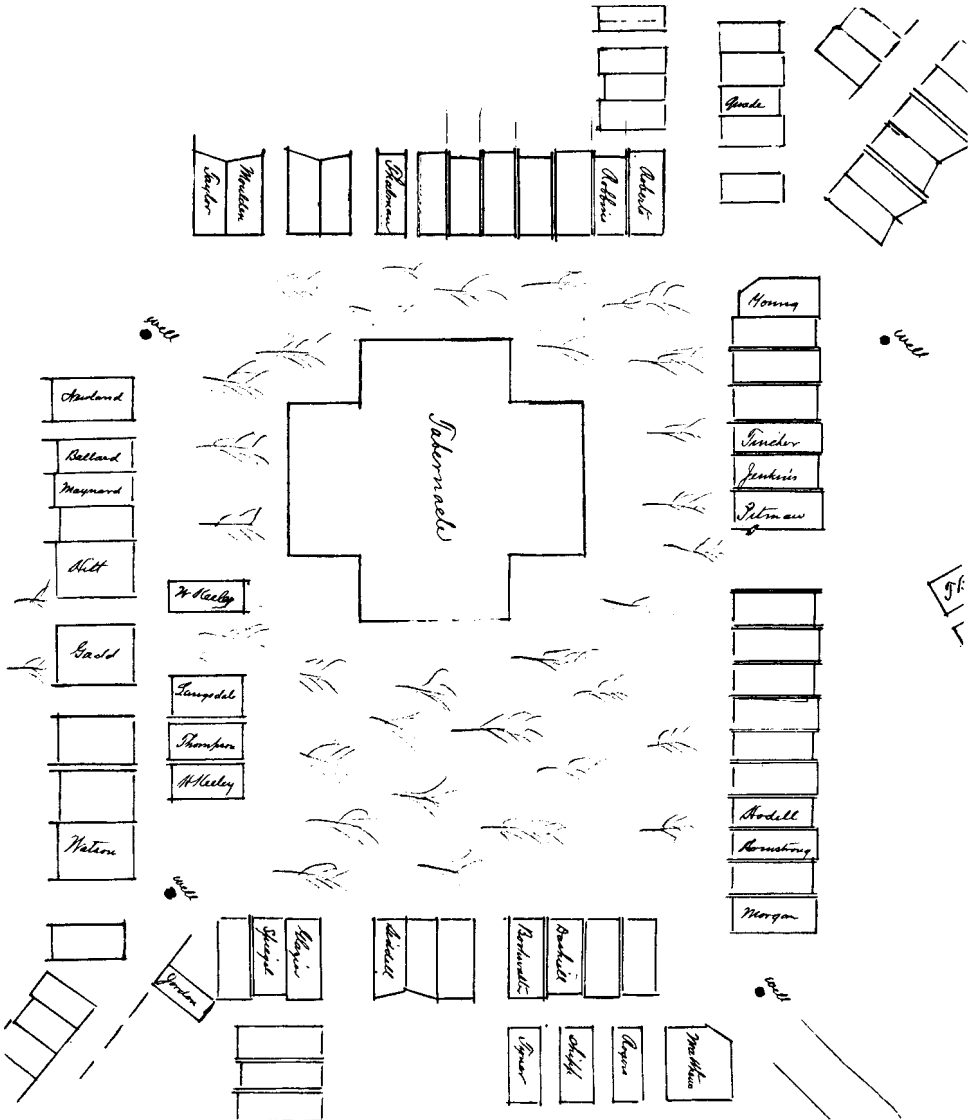
³⁸ *Indianapolis News*, July 31, 1899.

³⁹ George W. Pittman, quoted in Wayne Guthrie, "Ringside in Hoosierland," *ibid.*, September 10, 1958.

⁴⁰ "Rules for the Government of the Acton Park Asso'n," Brenton Papers.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Acton Chautauqua*, July 22-August 10, 1904.



COPY OF A DIAGRAM OF ACTON CAMP GROUND.

Located in the Claude Brenton Papers.
Provided by Sylvia C. Henricks.

Dinners for Trolley Parties [were] a *Specialty*" of the hotel,⁴³ and it is said to have been a favorite local honeymoon resort.

Cottages were located on the four sides of a square in which the camp ground pavilion, or tabernacle, stood. It was a cross shaped wooden structure "with a capacity of 2500 persons."⁴⁴ Covering the window openings were large shutters that could be propped up, allowing free circulation of air. The dirt floor was covered with straw. Unpainted wooden pews provided the seating, gasoline torches the lighting.⁴⁵ The area immediately surrounding the pavilion was subject to special restrictions. Smoking was not allowed in the area at any time, and during services "all promenading, [and] loitering around in groups" was prohibited as well as all conversation "under the p[a]vilion and in its immediate vicinity."⁴⁶ No work in or around nearby cottages was to be done that might in any way disturb a service at the pavilion.

There were strict rules applying to the camp ground as a whole. The keeping of order was of prime importance, and the association trustees constantly maintained a police force, whose headquarters was in the railroad cottage where "all breaches of order" were to be reported. "The laws for the protection of religious assemblies, and especially those prohibiting the sale of intoxicating drinks, and of huckstering in the vicinity of the encampment" were enforced.⁴⁷ The trustees wanted these prohibitions maintained not only within the camp ground, but in a one mile area beyond it. No "meetings or amusements inconsistent with [the] spirit & precepts of [the] Christian Religion" were to be allowed, and specifically, "Dancing & other improper amusements [were] never [to be] permitted."⁴⁸ Children under twelve were not to leave the camp ground unless their parents accompanied them; "loitering in the groves on the grounds after dark" was "positively forbidden"⁴⁹ and everyone who was not boarding there was to have left the grounds by 10:30 P.M. when the gates were locked.

The camper's day began with the ringing of a bell for all to rise. Family worship was at 7 A.M. in the cottages, a fellowship meeting was held at 9, a sermon or lecture was given at 10:30. There was a 2 P.M. song service, followed by a sermon or lecture at 2:30. A children's meeting was at 4; young people's meeting was at 7, and the preaching service was at 8 P.M. At 10 P.M. the retiring bell was

⁴³ *Acton Chautauqua*, July 26-August 15, 1905.

⁴⁴ *Indianapolis Star*, November 14, 1905.

⁴⁵ Pittman, quoted in Guthrie, "Ringside in Hoosierland."

⁴⁶ "Rules for the Government of the Acton Park Asso'n," Brenton Papers.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Camp Ground Record, 1882, Brenton Papers.

⁴⁹ "Rules for the Government of the Acton Park Asso'n," *ibid.*

rung, and at 10:30 there was to be silence throughout the camp. People were required to "retire within their cottages, cease talking, blow out lights, and keep quiet."⁵⁰

Programs at the camp ground were varied. Often a day was devoted to a special group: Epworth League, Junior League, the Women's Home Missionary Society, or the Women's Christian Temperance Union. On Old Soldiers' Day veterans and members of the Women's Relief Corps were admitted free. Farmers' Day was always well attended. In later years chautauqua programs were included. These provided a more secular, but still highly moral entertainment. The program of the 1904 Acton Park Chautauqua, which was evidently prepared early and sent to prospective campers, promised "Wit, Humor, Rollicking Fun, Quartettes, Solos, Choruses, Barnard's Orchestra, News Boys' Band, Lectures, Sermons, Speeches, Children's Drills, Stereopticons, Etc." Featured attractions were the stereopticon programs "'Up the Nile'" and "'Among the Rockies with Camera and Pencil,'" "Short Talks by Old Folks," and a Young Ladies' Military Band. There was a Fraternity Day with Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and others invited to give short speeches; DePauw Day when President Edwin H. Hughes of DePauw University was to speak; and Political Day when the candidates for governor were invited. The activities were to last from July 22 through August 10 and promised "*A Grand Time for all Who Attend.*"⁵¹ The 1905 Chautauqua program assured "Twenty Days with Rich and Varied Talent." One featured item was described: "The Grant-Marone, Monologist and Harpist, are a combination presenting a refined and artistic program, selected from the best in music and literature. The harp is particularly adapted to the human voice, and their renditions given together produce an impression which lingers long in the memory."⁵²

Many famous speakers came to the camp ground, or Acton Park as it was sometimes called in its later years. "Almost every man of prominence in church or letters in Indiana has been heard at the park during the meetings of the association. From beyond the State have come men of note and speakers of wide reputation."⁵³ William Jennings Bryan spoke there more than once; George W. Pittman recalled one speech that was two and a half hours long with the only other sound that produced by "the rhythmic motion of the palm-leaf fans everyone had . . ."⁵⁴ Other speakers included Fitzhugh Lee, nephew

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Acton Chautauqua, July 22-August 10, 1904.*

⁵² *Acton Chautauqua, July 26-August 15, 1905, 24.*

⁵³ *Indianapolis Star*, November 13, 1905.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Guthrie, "Ringside in Hoosierland."

of Robert E. Lee, and also a Confederate general; Ballington Booth, son of the founder of the Salvation Army, who organized the Volunteers of America; John B. Gordon, a Confederate general who was later prominent in Georgia politics. Among clergymen who spoke were Sam Jones, a Methodist evangelist of great persuasive power; Thomas DeWitt Talmage, a prominent Presbyterian minister whose sermons were for thirty years printed in hundreds of religious and secular newspapers and in book form; and William Quayle, a Methodist minister noted for his great oratorical ability.

In August, 1905, the association met for a business session at which time it made plans for the cottagers to assume the indebtedness that had hung over the camp ground for more than twenty years by issuing \$10 bonds at 3 per cent interest. Members also liberalized the constitution of the association so that, while only a Methodist could be president of the association, any tent owner connected with any evangelical church could hold a lesser office.⁵⁵ The successful 1905 season and the good response to the sale of the bonds gave the association great hope of removing the indebtedness.⁵⁶

But on November 12, 1905, disaster struck the Acton Camp Ground. It was a windy Sunday afternoon. Shortly after a north-bound freight train went by around 3 o'clock, children playing nearby saw flames in the camp ground racing through the dry leaves. Apparently sparks from the engine had ignited dry leaves and grass along the track. The children ran into Acton to rouse the townfolk, and they and the custodian of the grounds and a few campers, who had not yet closed their cottages for the season, tried to fight the fire.⁵⁷ After ten minutes they realized it was hopeless. The weather had been dry, the breeze was brisk, and the flames spread from cottage to cottage until all one hundred and ten had been burned. "In half an hour every cottage in the park was ablaze, and in an hour every cottage and the big tabernacle had been burned to the ground." The only buildings left were the hotel, which caught fire several times but had the flames extinguished, the bandstand, and the custodian's house which were out of the path of the fire.⁵⁸

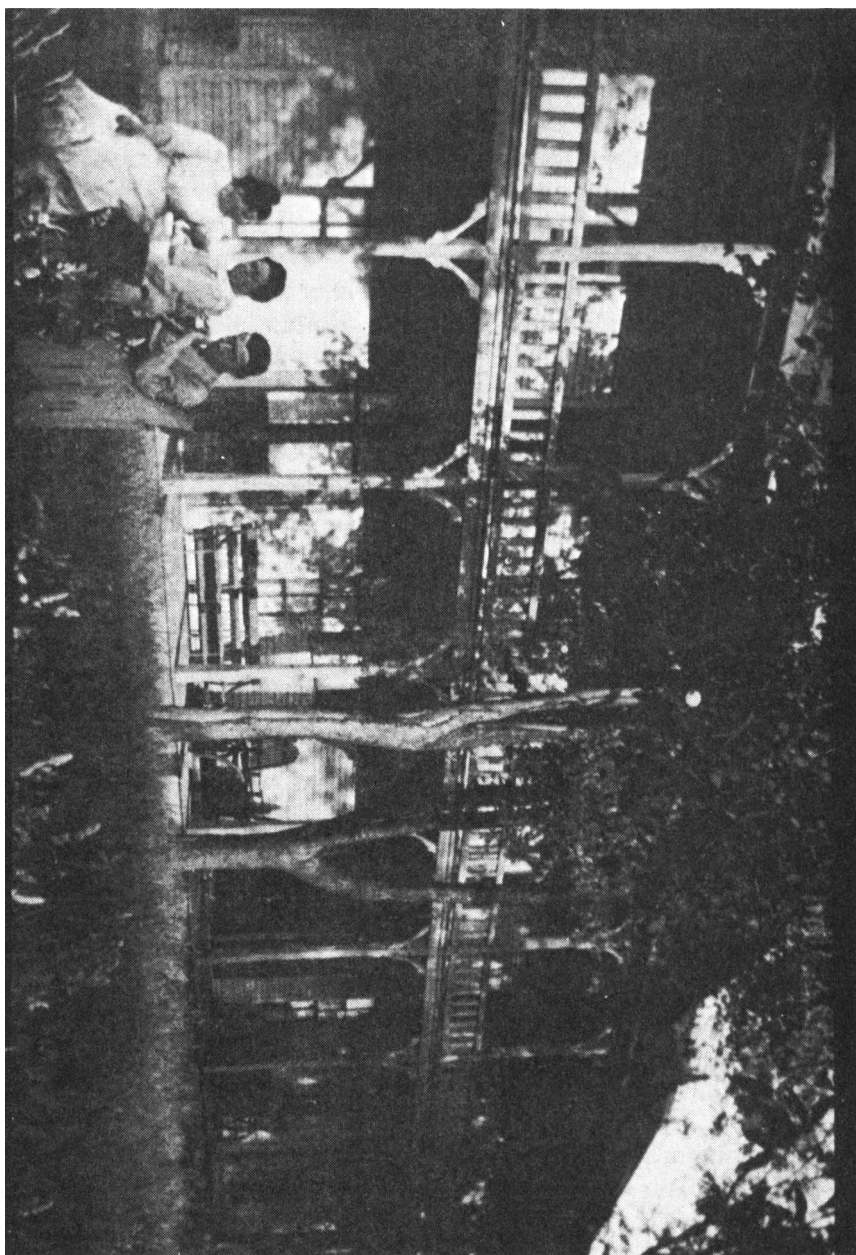
Cottage holders reportedly were eager to rebuild, but the officers of the association were less optimistic. "They said that years and years of hard work had been undone in a brief half hour and that serious obstacles existed to handicap the association in rebuilding the

⁵⁵ *Indianapolis Star*, August 11, 1905.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, August 13, 1905.

⁵⁷ Interview with Mrs. Rommie Hayworth, Acton, Indiana, November 10, 1967. The newspaper version of the fire indicates that the custodian found the fire first and roused the people of Acton by telephone. *Indianapolis Star*, November 13, 1905.

⁵⁸ *Indianapolis Star*, November 13, 1905.



PHOTOGRAPH OF THE HOTEL AT ACTON CAMP GROUND, AFTER 1905.

Courtesy of Iva Jane Rabourn.

place.”⁵⁹ A special meeting of the Acton Park Association was held in the hotel kitchen on November 21 with about seventy-five persons present. Everyone felt the railroad was responsible for the loss, estimated in excess of \$30,000, to their buildings and 425 shade trees. The trustees and directors were authorized to confer with the railroad officials in an effort to settle the damages without resorting to the courts. They were also authorized to clear the grounds of debris, sell the wreckage for the best figure available, and have the grounds replatted. Some of the officers were doubtful that the title to the grounds would stand up in court, for when the camp ground was established the association had no charter or other legal form of organization that would allow them to hold real estate under the law.⁶⁰

At an April, 1906, meeting the stockholders of the Acton Park Association voted to continue operation of the camp ground, and to bring fifteen individual suits against the railroad for their losses. The officers of the association thought it wiser to abandon the camp ground. “It was declared that funds were lacking, that Methodists generally had lost interest in the place and that to ‘resume business’ would mean failure and more debts.” But the stockholders were determined to go ahead with their plans for the summer: “an old-fashioned Methodist gathering . . . tents taking the place of cottages.”⁶¹ On August 9, 1906, the stockholders of the Acton Park Association met and elected officers and trustees, and considered the question of rebuilding. It was agreed that if forty property owners would promise to rebuild within one year, the trustees would be instructed to replat and proceed with rebuilding; but if forty promises could not be obtained, then the trustees would be authorized to dispose of the property at the best figure available. Twenty pledges were given at that meeting; a final report was to be made in December. Although the weather was bad, various preachers led “Enthusiastic meetings . . . being held daily” in the hotel, reported the *Indianapolis News*.⁶²

Apparently the hopes of the cottagers to rebuild did not materialize, for the Acton Camp Ground was sold. Residents of Acton report that the custodian’s house stood for several years; then it was destroyed by fire. The hotel, after serving a variety of uses, including a temporary school and a dance hall, was dismantled and the lumber sold. Over the years wells that had been dug for campers were filled in and the foundations of the buildings levelled. The forty acre

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, November 14, 1905. At some point prior to the fire the association had incorporated and become the Acton Park Association. Details of this change have not been located.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, November 22, 1905.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, April 4, 1906.

⁶² *Indianapolis News*, August 10, 1906.

tract was divided. The half which had contained most of the buildings is now being used for homes; the remainder is meadow and trees. The stream still wanders quietly through the grounds, and a few of the old trees that survived the fire still cast their shade. The railroad has changed from double to single track, and the interurban that ran between the train tracks and the road is completely gone. Except for the vestiges of the dam there is no sign of the camp ground that was the source of so much pleasure and inspiration to thousands through its fifty year history. Only the site of the camp ground remains, its story almost forgotten. It is a facet of Indiana's past, a glimpse into a time most Hoosiers can now share only in imagination. The present is more accurately comprehended by an appreciation of these long ago campers, today's spiritual and secular antecedents, who enjoyed their camp meeting, that "good and profitable occasion" of a bygone day.