

*\*The following is a direct excerpt from the book "Dover-Foxcroft: A History" by Louis E. Stevens.*

## **CAMP MEETING HISTORY OF DOVER FOXCROFT, MAINE**

The first Methodist camp meeting on Summer Street in Foxcroft was held the first week of September in 1880. Efforts to have the annual gathering moved here from Charleston, where it was held for 14 years, had failed in 1873 because a committee could not get enough money to purchase the land.

But this problem was solved in 1879 when many "local citizens of all denominations subscribed liberally for the purchase of the grounds," an ideal location with a grove of maples and hemlocks for shade for the hundreds who would tent there, and a magnificent spring that furnished water without end.

The change in location – helped by Foxcroft having a railroad that could, and it did, bring in hundreds of worshippers on the excursion trains – proved most beneficial to the association which was soon able to construct a small church and outdoor pews where as many as 5,000 persons gathered in the late 1800s to hear a Sunday sermon. Services would be held for 17 years through 1926 when the final meeting was held after which the grounds were sold.

Back in 1871, it had been proposed to move the meeting grounds here, but the asking price for the grove, \$2,000, was too high. But the atrocious weather during 1879, when heavy rains turned the black earth into slow-drying deep mud, made the officials decide it was time to move. Of course, the *Observer* extolled the beauties of the Foxcroft location with its short walk from the railroad station on Depot Street in Dover, the young growth of trees, and the "splendid spring."

In December of 1879, the Piscataquis Valley Camp Meeting Association was incorporated, and its financial worries evaporated when many citizens donated money to buy the grove. This was done, and by mid August the grounds were ready. A fountain was built to provide water of "great volume, coldness and purity." During the next few years, more land was cleared, families built cottages, while others lived in tents during the seven-day meeting. In 1885, the young men of the YMCA here held a "praise and jubilee" meeting during the week.

The meetings soon proved to be very popular, especially with out-of-towners who often came by train. On the Sunday in 1885, over 3,000 were there. The *Observer* said that the hotel and restaurant owners and the livery stable "taxis" reaped a "good harvest during the week." The success of the meeting was not just spiritual, but financial as well, as the association was now able to complete payment for the grove. More money meant being able to construct a stable for 20 horses. New cottages were built too.

The first of a number of crowds of 5,000 for a Sunday appeared on August 29, 1886. The next spring money was spent improving the walks. One day that year, the dirt roads were so exceedingly dusty that one enterprising carriage owner made a good sum by charging each person 5 cents for the trip from the railroad station to the grove. A peddler of liquor showed up and tried to dispense the "ardent to the thirsty," but he was arrested and fined \$25. Again, a crowd of 5,000 attended on Sunday.

More cottages were erected in 1887-8, and naturally the town officials of Foxcroft could not let them go tax free, so in May of 1889, it was announced they would now tax the summer homes. The streets

and lighting were improved, and further repairs made, so no wonder the paper said, “The grounds never looked more beautiful.” It printed a list of 275 families living there in their tents and cottages where the “most excellent order is always maintained” so that those “who visit it once are always anxious to come again.”

After the meeting – always so beneficial financially to the merchants in town – the association reported 80 conversions made during the week, and since there was now \$1,200 in the treasury, it was voted to build a new chapel (many years later to become the Crystal Ball Room dance hall) seating nearly 1,200. A crew of 25 men and 15 horses with dump cars from eight area towns were on the grounds in late September to remove 21 unneeded trees and stumps.

The new chapel was erected in 1890 and was given a new coat of paint in 1891 when 20 clergymen conducted the week-long services attended by nearly 4,000 on the last Sunday. The *Observer* gave this fine report of the grounds after the meeting:

“Monday morning began the exodus from the grounds  
 ...All was now bustle, noise, and confusion as in breaking  
 the encampment of an army. Voices of teamsters echoed  
 among the forest trees which so lately resounded with the  
 language of the prayer and praise and the melody of sacred  
 song. Tents were quickly stripped of their white covers and  
 their frail supports left to the mercy of elements. By noon  
 the place so full of life a few brief hours before, stood like  
 a deserted village.”

Lift windows to aid in ventilation were put in the chapel the next year when the usual large crowds attended, including two young men in a buggy parked near the grounds. The sheriff thought they looked suspicious and might be dispensing liquor, so he tried to stop them on the road to Sebec. He finally grabbed the reins of the horse, but the two men escaped. Just as he suspected, there were two gallons of cheap whiskey in the buggy.

The Epworth League of Dexter (named for the place in England where the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, was born) in the summer of 1893 had Epworth Hall constructed for \$700. It was two stories, 24' x 45', with an 18-foot extension for cooking, and a large room on the bottom floor could be used for meetings.

In December, the courts ruled the association could be taxed by Foxcroft for land and cottages despite being a religious concern as the area was used for purposes other than religion, so would not be exempt from taxes. The association was forced now to charge admission in 1894 with a season ticket costing 20 cents, a day ticket 10 cents, and a single service 5 cents. There was also an existing debt of \$900 on the property as the receipts for several years had failed to meet expenses. No pay had gone to those who maintained the grove.

The years from 1894 through 1903 were the greatest decade in the 47-year history of the camp meeting. Crowds of thousands – many of them arriving on special excursion trains from Greenville, Bangor, Newport, and Houlton – filled the grove for the Sunday services, with hundreds living in cottages and tents during the week; new streets were laid out to accommodate the crowds; the chapel was painted

and fences erected; extra stabling areas for horses were built; the town put down a sidewalk leading to the grounds (maybe with some of the tax money?); and new cottages were put up. Finally, in 1901, “one of the most beautiful and best equipped camps in the state was wholly out of debt.”

By midweek of 1894, there were 1,000 in cottages and tents ready for the three services each day at 10, 2, and 7, and on Sunday, the grounds “resounded with the songs of prayer and praise as the grove was filled with an outpouring of people that filled the streets with no less than 4,000 on the grounds in the afternoon, yet quiet and the best of order prevailed.”

The popularity of the Sunday preaching continued in 1895 with 4,000 filling the seats before the altar platform. Some 4,000 new seats with backs were set in place and painted in 1896 to make the outdoor services more enjoyable as more than half of the old seats lacked backs. About 6,000 attended on Sunday (700 arrived by train) when it was difficult to park all the horses and wagons. An awning stretching over the speaker’s stand on the tabernacle steps protected some from the sun. The grove contained such a large number the superintendent of the grounds had to light 74 lamps each night.

It was more of the same in 1897 when the railroads offered half-fare rates all week. On Sunday, all 4,000 seats were taken with nearly 1,000 more standing for the two services. All the restaurants and hotels in town were filled with. The *Observer* said, “The woods around the grounds were filled with horses on Sunday and at noon many families were perched on their wagons eating their dinners from shoe boxes.” A new street was added in 1898 for the meeting, which was now held in mid August. Ideal weather meant another crowd of 6,000 on Sunday, with hundreds again coming by train.

The huge crowds had meant extra money, which was used to build a wooden fence (2,140 feet long with 4,200 pickets) around the grounds; new walks were laid out; the chapel painted; and more lights added to the grove. By mid-August, the 130 cottages and tents were filled, and on Sunday another 4,000 jammed the grove to make the meeting the “most successful ever.” The B&A railroad had three excursion trains on Sunday in 1900, and they brought about 1,000 of the 5,000 there. A clear and fair Sunday in 1901 attracted 4,000.

It is most understandable why so many came to these meetings: There could be no more attractive seating for a church service than under the huge shade trees; Seeing old friends maybe just this once a year; For the excursionists a nice trip on the train; Great preaching and music from 5,000 voices; and excellent weather always prevailed.

To provide more room for horses and wagons in 1902, three acres of trees were cut from a grove, now the location of Free Street, opposite the entrance. The residence owned by the Indian family was moved about 40 feet to the west and a stone foundation put under it.

Large crowds all week heard 25 Methodist ministers preach. The largest crowd on a Sunday ever – over 6,000 with many coming by teams from the rural area and others on the heavily loaded trains from all directions – meant extra money in the treasury, so after the meeting the auditorium seats were painted and several hundred feet of new fence were put up. Sure, it must have seemed that such prosperity would continue forever – as it would do at Etna.

But the association then made the fatal mistake of ending the meeting on Saturday night for 1904 and 1905, which meant the loss of those great Sunday crowds which never returned when Sunday services

resume in 1906, through crowds of 3,000 would become usual again until the outbreak of World War I. The one exceptional year was 1909 when the *Observer* said,

“One of the largest crowds in recent years came in on the camp meeting excursions which were run by the Bangor & Aroostook to these towns Sunday. The Houlton train comprised 13 coaches and contained 1,110 excursionists while the Bangor and Greenville trains each had five cars and about 600 passengers. A great many came in teams and automobiles [note: the first time cars are mentioned] and the crowd was estimated upwards of 5,000. Restaurants and grocery stores were taxed to the utmost in supplying eatables. Even the balloon and cane men came in with the crowd and found ready sale for their wares. In spite of the large number of people everything was orderly and no disturbances were reported.”

At the 34<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in 1913, a large number of WCTU members were on hand to honor Lillian Steves of Dover who was both state and national president of the Union. In 1914, \$700 was spent for a new platform at the tabernacle, lights were added, and rocks and roots taken away. But the Sunday crowds were nearer 2,000 now, and the camp meeting received less and less space in the paper each year.

The meetings continued during World War I (in 1916 there was a record attendance for the week) and the next two years, but the association faced a problem in 1921 when the State Board of Health condemned the grounds because some 15-20 families were now living there year round. When the campground was established, it was ruled that the cottages were only to be used at meeting time, but permission had been given to some to remain. All this led to very poor, unsanitary conditions (dampness, no toilet facilities, and no drainage) and this led to the health ruling. The president of the association promised a quick cleaning up and the cottages vacated as fast as possible. The *Observer* commented, “Wonder has been expressed a great many times that an epidemic disease has not started there and the contemplate improvement will meet with general approval.”

But it was four years later in September of 1925 that the trustees and members of the Piscataquis Camp Meeting Association voted to completely close the grounds to occupancy after May 1, 1926. The *Observer* said,

“Conditions on the grounds at the last meeting in August were so distasteful [note: much can be read into that word!] that a strong sentiment arose to sell the property. There was much discussion both for and against selling and it was finally voted not to sell but to close the grounds to occupancy as stated.

This was done and the meeting was held in 1926 – evidently with incident. In January of 1926, there was a short new item saying that Forrest and Gladys Farris were married –a wedding that would have, in a few years, a great effect upon the future of the tabernacle and the grounds.

Many factors – such as the unsanitary conditions at the grove, the problem with state health officials, the steady decline in attendance and possibly religion as well, no more excursion trains due to

the poor economic times for the railroads, and the great increase in automobiles that made it easier for folks to travel – all helped to force the association to meet October 10, 1927, to consider “a proposition to sell all the physical properties, the same being all its real estate and cottages and tabernacle to Fred Farris or any other party.” Farris was the buyer, and he said he would convert the cottages into overnight camps as the traffic on Summer Street would increase greatly as the State Highway Commission had recently ruled that the new road to Milo would go out Summer and over the hills rather than follow the river road. The Epworth building was moved nearer the street and made into a home for Mr. Farris and his family. It was also for many years the home and a store operated for Forrest and Gladys.

So, for a few summers, the grove, which once had been filled with the sound of thousands of voices singing *Rock of Ages* and *Nearer My God to Thee*, was silent, but inside the tabernacle could be heard the sounds of construction as the church was being converted into a dance pavilion. A hardwood floor was laid, a stage built for the orchestra, and the inside remodeled and decorated.

But the biggest feature was a gigantic crystal ball, the decoration that gave the pavilion its unique name. The huge ball, hanging from the center of the room, was covered with small mirrors, and was made to turn by a motor. In the four corners of the room were different colored lights, and when the lights struck the thousands of reflectors, the room was filled with gently floating dots of color as if packages of confetti had been released.

The grand opening of the “Crystal Ball Room” was held Friday night, May 17, 1929, when folks were invited in the newspaper to “Come and dance under the crystal ball,” with admission being “gents 75 cents and ladies 35 cents.” A large crowd attended and were much “delighted with the ball which is a great novelty.”

It would remain so for many years until the days of TV, and so, like many other dance halls, had to close its doors. The last dances were held about 1953.

And the rest of the grove? Many of the cottages would be winterized for all-year living, and a soft drink company used the great spring for its water. But over the years, the cottage succumbed to time, the fence and pews were removed, the bottling company ceased operations, and church-turned-pavilion became weather-beaten and dilapidated. And the nickname of “campground” for that area would be used less and less by folks who remembered the great church days, the dance hall, or who once lived in the neighborhood.

Still, on a warm September afternoon in the silence of the grove, it is easy to hear 5,000 worshippers lifting their voices to sing a closing hymn under the canopy of the elms and hemlocks above them, and on a moonlight night in July, it’s still possible to hear a waltz or fox trot being played for the hundreds of dancers beneath that crystal ball which fortunately was saved and is now swirling again in the reception building at the fairgrounds, only a short polka from its original home at an area of town still known by some as the “campground.”

*\*Photo on next page...*

This is the tabernacle at the camp meeting grounds (later the Crystal Ball Room) and the pews are part of the 4,000 seats that were often filled for Sunday services.

