

THE CAMPING PROGRAM OF THE PORTLAND MENNONITE MISSION

by Margaret Shetler

The first services of what we today remember as the Portland Mennonite Mission were held November 12, 1922. The work prospered and grew so that on July 27, 1924, a congregation was organized with 25 charter members. That number included Allen Good and wife Fannie who had been superintendent and matron of the mission from its beginning in 1922.

Allen Good had worked at the mission in Kansas City, Kansas, for several years in the mid-teens and was a man of vision with seemingly boundless energy and had numerous programs going fairly early in the work. He conducted one of the first summer Bible schools in the Mennonite Church and certainly the first in Oregon, in 1924. Another program he introduced to Portland and the Oregon churches was called the Children's Fresh Air Work. This kind of program was not new to churches further east. The Chicago Mission, for instance, had been sending children to the country for a number of years already. These children spent a period of time in the homes of host Mennonite families from the valley. In 1928 there were 94 fresh air children and workers.

In 1929, in addition to the children being hosted in private homes, Allen Good instituted what was one of the first, if not the first, camping program in the Mennonite Church. Camping as a mission outreach was not new; others, including the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites, had been doing it for several years.

For the first three years, 1929, 30 and 31, the girls camped in the fir trees below the old Zion church house, and on occasion used the car sheds for sleeping purposes. Conditions at best were primitive. That first church building had neither running water nor indoor plumbing. Cooking was done on an old wood cook stove. They probably had a large tent with straw for their mattresses. Bernice (Widmer) Kauffman Yoder recently remarked as we talked a bit about those early years how generous and helpful members of the congregation were with food and other things. The first year there were 14 girls.

During those same years the boys camped on the 300-acre Erb Brothers farm on Pudding River. Their facilities were similar to the girls: two old wood cook stoves and a large tent with beds of straw covered with canvas. I came across an interesting notice regarding camping on the Erb Farm, signed by Albert D. Erb, reading as follows:

Absolutely no smoking permitted.

None are permitted to carry matches except the caretakers. No firecrackers to be tolerated.

All due caution to be exercised to prevent fire hazards.

That first year both camps lasted ten days.

Allen Good terminated his services at the Mission in April 1932. Henry Yoder, deacon of the congregation, with his wife Lydia moved into the Mission Home and he served as interim superintendent until November 1934 while continuing his employment at the nearby Casket Factory. He was unable to continue all the programming Allen Good had been overseeing, even with the help of the mission staff, so the camping program was suspended and not until 1937 was the program revived.

Glen and Fern Whitaker began serving as superintendent and matron of the Mission in June 1936. Glen had grown up in the Albany congregation. In 1937 Glen reestablished the camping program. By this time a site for camp had been made available by Sam and Nellie Miller on their farm a couple miles east of Hubbard on the Pudding River. Some changes were recommended for the program that

year. The camps were to be small, only 10 to 15 children at a time, one week each. Campers able to do so were to pay \$2 and bring their own bedding when possible. (Before this, the Mission had furnished the bedding which they owned and maintained.) Parents were to sign that the church was not responsible for the child, I suppose in case of injury or illness. This camp did have electricity available and I believe there was also water on the premises. I didn't find any notations anywhere, but if my memory is correct, boys and girls were segregated; that is, one week it would be a boys' camp; the next week would be for the girls.

The following year, 1938, facilities were improved. There were a few new tents. Glen would have liked to have boats for use on the river, but that didn't happen. I don't know when the cook shack was built. It was a small building with a wood cook-stove, cupboards for food and dishes and a place for food preparation. One side had hinged doors which could be let down and used as a serving table for food. Also that year Glen had requested and received wooden planks for seating for a camp meeting. I don't know if they had a camp meeting that year for members of congregations and others of the surrounding community as well as the campers. I do remember the one in 1939 as that was probably the first year I have memories of the camp at Sam Millers. One vivid memory is of Mildred Wolfer and Donella Hooley, sisters, singing a duet, "The Camp Meeting in the Air."

I am not aware how Sundays were handled during the earlier camps but after the camp was held at Millers, the children were taken to the various local congregations, Hopewell, Zion or Bethel, for church and then hosted in homes of members for dinner and the afternoon, and taken back to the evening services. As previously, food was brought in by the surrounding congregations. The cooks used what they were given. I recall one cook mentioning that she was having a problem being creative with all the cabbage she had received. There must have been an abundant cabbage crop that year. The Whitakers accepted a call to serve in the mission program in Los Angeles and terminated at Portland probably early in 1939 but remained in the city until fall and so helped with camp and perhaps he conducted the 8-day meeting that year.

Marcus Lind was the next superintendent and he continued and expanded the work of Glen Whitaker. I was away during the next few years, either working or attending school, so don't have memories of the camp and I didn't find many notes on the first years Marcus and Salome were there. This was also the period of World War II and during this time the complexion and composition of the Sunday school changed. Most of the children attending camp were from the Sunday school. During the war the Sunday school became about half African American children plus others who lived in the nearby housing development that had sprung up and from where they were bussed to the mission. That's a whole story unto itself. So there were more racially mixed groups in the camps.

In 1945 camp operated for one week, from Monday to Monday. Activities included hiking, chores, food, games, Bible and missionary stories, campfire services, swimming, horseback riding, crawfishing. Each camp was treated to one day when they went to Silver Falls Park and hiked around the falls and enjoyed a picnic lunch.

Marcus terminated his services in 1945 to assume the principalship of the newly established Western Mennonite School. Paul E. Yoder served in the capacity of superintendent during the next two years and continued to strengthen the program. Paul had previously been pastor of the Albany congregation where they were involved with camping programs that used the facilities at the White Branch camp on the McKenzie River in the Cascades.

In 1946 the facilities on the Miller farm were further improved. There were ten new tents, cots for sleeping and floors for the tents. That year there were two camps, one each for boys and girls.

Each camp ran two weeks with a total of about 24 children plus workers in the camp.

Claud Hostetler became superintendent following Paul Yoder and continued the existing programs, including camping. A few notes and statistics from the first years of Claud's superintendency follow.

In the summer of 1950 there were 38 boys - the largest number to date. Some of the campers were from the Albany congregation. And more Negro youngsters were attending camp.

In 1951 there were 33 girls and 39 boys.

In 1952 because of crowded conditions, it seems only Portland youngsters were accepted as campers.

Nellie Miller had died in 1950 and a few years later Sam Miller sold his farm; however the new owner permitted the Mission to use the camp facilities yet for the 1954 summer camping season.

In 1955 there were only 13 campers and they went to White Branch. This didn't prove to be too successful. One factor was the distance from Portland. Another had to do with cultural differences among the campers.

In early 1956 the Portland Mission as such ceased to exist. The congregation was organized as an autonomous entity and renamed the Portland Mennonite Church. There were several reasons for the closing of the mission. Once more the demographics of the area were changing and it was becoming more industrialized. The city condemned the living quarters of the single mission workers.

Claud Hostetler continued as pastor of the congregation and the Sunday school and similar programs didn't change immediately either. One of the questions facing the new congregation was what to do about summer camp.

Our family had moved to a partially timbered, fairly large acreage in the hills above Scotts Mills in the fall of 1955. We were members of and attending the Portland Church at that time as well. The decision was made to provide a camp site on our property. Much work went into getting the site ready for camp in the summer of 1956. A summer V.S. unit with Frank Brillhart from Scottdale, Pennsylvania, was acquired. There were numerous Saturday and holiday work days involved. The cook shack from Sam Miller's place as well as the tent floors were hauled up to our place and gotten ready for use. An electric line was run down to the area and the road and driveway had to be improved and made usable, even when it rained. The first summer at least, and perhaps longer, water was hauled from our house, which was just up the road. Later, a spring below the camp was improved and a pump installed, and there was running water to the cook shack.

With the Brillharts and staff in charge, there were 17 boys and 19 girls as campers that first year. I think the traditional day at Silver Falls Park was continued. (It wasn't quite so far from our place.) Swimming was available and enjoyed down at the swimming hole at Scotts Mills, a bit over three miles away. There was a small creek behind the camp called Alder Creek, thus the name Alder Creek Camp.

Mention was made earlier about one of the activities being crawfishing. That is one memory I have of camp on our place. Those youngsters certainly enjoyed catching, cooking and eating crawdads, whether from our small creek or from Butte Creek, I don't remember.

In 1957 there were 22 boys and 22 girls in the two camps which ran for ten days each. Again, there was a service unit in charge.

There are a lot of things I do not remember about the camps those years. I was really not involved with the operation of the camps. I don't recall how Sundays were handled. Probably the activities of the day were made special just in the camp. Evening campfires were always a major activity at all times.

By this time, campers were able to pay a fee for the privilege of attending camp and the food was purchased rather than donated.

Again, I do not have a whole lot of data regarding camps and activities and my memory does not serve me well either. So I don't know how long the week-long or longer camps for Sunday school and Bible school children continued. In 1961 there were 24 children brought out for a weekend by the Voluntary Service unit located in northeast Portland.

In 1962 there was a weekend MYF camp and also a married couple's retreat one weekend. Again in 1963 both groups used the camp. By this time our older boys were licensed drivers and they also participated some with the MYF campers. We had an old Jeep that the boys enjoyed driving around on the place, which has some fairly steep hills on it. One evening, rather late, some of the girls wanted a Jeep ride and one of the boys was more than willing to oblige. He took them up on top of the hill one way and came back down on an extremely steep and rough road, fairly close to our house. Before coming down the hill, he warned the girls that they were not to scream because "The folks are probably in bed and you don't want to wake them up!"

1964 was the first year for camping at Drift Creek Camp and it appears that year campers from Portland went there. However, we find that in 1965 there were 47 campers at Alder Creek in three camps that ran from Wednesday through Sunday. It seems the decision to have these camps was made on rather short notice.

The old cook shack was showing its age so in 1966 the decision was made to replace it with a larger building that could serve as kitchen, dining area and a place to use in inclement weather as well as for other activities. The first third of the building was ready for use yet that summer. The statistics for that year show a total of about 60 campers which included grade school youngsters, MYFers, married couples and the MYF Cabinet.

The new building was finished in the next year or two and proved to be a real asset. In 1968 there were 60 children in five camps and questions were beginning to arise regarding the whole camping program.

In 1969 the Portland Mennonite Church relocated from the Savier Street site in northwest Portland to a different facility in southeast Portland. I had few records from that time on to peruse, but those I did check do not mention any kind of camping program. I suspect that 1969 was probably the last year that Portland folks used the facilities at Alder Creek Camp. But the camping legacy and ministry began in 1929 by Portland Mission personnel lives on today in the ministry of Drift Creek Camp.

By the mid 1970s Portland Mennonite Church had no interest in the Alder Creek site or facilities and the building that was erected has since been remodeled a couple of times and is now lived in by a granddaughter and her family.

Is camping worthwhile? Most definitely, yes! Some of the comments one heard from some of the youngsters for whom it may have been the first time to be so far away from the city were interesting and revealing. For instance, one boy was heard to remark that, "I didn't know so many folks lived in these woods." There was also disappointment expressed that there wasn't a store around the corner where they could buy a can of soda pop.

Resources.

Kauffman, Jess: *A Vision and a Legacy: The Story of Mennonite Camping, 1920-80.* c1984, Faith and Life Press.

An unpublished history of the Portland Mennonite Church by Hope Lind. Information found in the archival holdings of the OMHGS: Claud Hostetler collection and the Portland Mennonite Mission collection.