

Notes on Emig's Grove Camp Meeting Association

BY MAXINE LUMSARGIS

Maxine Lumsargis had a passion for the history of her adopted home in Manchester Township. Her ultimate goal was to publish a book that captured the back-story of this agricultural area peopled by farmers of German descent. It's a rich story about people of strong character and resolute independence that reaches out to those in need.

Maxine had stories in need of an editor and publisher. Some of her stories were already written in prose, ready for the final printing. Others were simply a collection of notes waiting for her to assemble them into a readable story. The following is one of those articles consisting more of scattered notes than finished writing.

From an August 18, 1896 York newspaper article regarding the campground fire:

“EMIG'S GROVE DEVASTATED”

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All the Cottages Burned Yesterday

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PERSONAL EFFECTS LOST

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There Were About Five Hundred People  
present - A Scarcity of Water Allowed the  
Flames to Make their Work Complete -  
The Tents will be Rebuilt at Once.

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Calamity has overtaken the great Emig's Grove Camp Meeting Association. In less than an hour its camp ground was swept from end to end by devouring elements, and now naught remains of the beautiful retreat except the trees, much the worse from the scorching experience they have undergone, and the fine new lodge and the little restaurant. Every cottage, the tabernacle and the boarding tent are a mass of ruins, and the scene is a sorry one in the extreme.

The camp has had an uninterrupted era of prosperity for many years. Annually it has attracted thousands of people from all parts of the land, and it has proven one of the most delightful and successful of camps. The season of '96 was also a successful one, and the term would have closed last night had it not been for the catastrophe that overtook it yesterday. Fortunately the great crush was over for the season.

Many of the ministers had gone home, and the visitors had dwindled down to about five hundred people. Many of those who were yet on the ground had their goods packed up, preparatory to removal, as the last services were to be held in the evening, the goodbyes were to be said and the camp would have been at an end. So the campers were about to begin their last services. The morning worship had been conducted, the breakfast had been partaken of, and perfect tranquility reigned when at 7:30 an alarm of fire was raised from the northeast corner of the grove.

The dreadful cry was taken up in all directions, and at once a rush was made in the direction from whence the alarm came. Here was located No. 98 occupied by Mrs. D. G. Foose. The scene that was there presented was startling in the extreme. Some ashes from the stove had been scraped aside and unnoticed the fire in them had communicated to some paper or straw of which it appears there was a good deal scattered about the ground. From this the fire got to the building, and it was but the work of moments until the fire had assumed such proportions that hope of saving the camp was meager, indeed. Those who could, jumped to the front at once and did all they possibly could to avert the threatened disaster. The water supply was not calculated for a fire of this extent, and all the efforts put forth were unavailable in the least.

There were only several pumps. The startled campers soon saw that the only thing to do was to try to save what personal property they could. Many were very fortunate in this respect, but quite a number lost all, or nearly all, they had on the grounds. The circumstance of many of the goods being packed ready for removal aided, largely in their hasty transfer. While the more collected ones were doing noble work in saving property, many women fainted, others rushed about crying and adding to the general commotion. It is a fact that some women were noticed carrying their belongings from one spot of danger to another, only to again be compelled to remove them out of harm's way. Children ran around aimlessly, got in the way and with their lungs assisted to heighten the clamor.

In the meantime the flames were carried from the northeast corner where they started in a southwesterly direction and swept everything before them. Cottage after cottage succumbed to the devouring flames. The giant oaks and other trees were licked clean of foliage, and one after another they were blackened and blighted, and it is believed many of them will die. Onward sped the flames, in their course taking the tabernacle, the boarding tent, the pews, the pulpit and all within reach, and in forty-five minutes from the time the alarm was started the beautiful grove was well nigh a desolate waste of charred embers, blackened trees and anything in appearance but a cool breezy place of out door worship. The handsome new lodge for the tenant escaped the general destruction and its only companion is the little restaurant up in the woods.

The fire was not confined to the grove either. In a field adjoining Mrs. David Williams' had a large straw

stack. This was burned and even her house was threatened with destruction. Had it not been for Mr. John Wogan who came on the scene with two fire extinguishers the buildings at this place would undoubtedly have fared a similar fate. The cottages burned number about thirty-five. They were each double tents 18 x 18 feet in dimensions, two stories high. The tabernacle was about 60 x 40 feet in dimensions, and the boarding tent was 50 x 75 feet.

The loss is estimated at about \$6000. There is an insurance of \$3555. Several of the tents were owned by individuals who probably had them insured. ~ The loss on personal property may reach \$1000 or more. The total loss is believed to be nearly \$8000. It is fortunate there were no accidents to persons. True, there were a good many burned fingers, but it is considered lucky that nothing worse happened.

The next camp meeting will be held the first Friday of next August. Although there had been considerable precaution taken against the fire, the regulations hereafter will probably be even more strict. The departments in which fire is to be used will be kept about 20 or 30 feet away from each cottage, and enclosed in a fence. This was done by some of the cottagers before, but the rule was not general, nor was it generally observed.

The fire was seen a long distance from the camp ground. The smoke was plainly seen from York. Sparks and burning leaves were carried all over the county for miles about. The morning train took up a large number of Yorkers, and a steady line of carriages and bicycles could be seen wending their way to the scene all day. The news of the fire was received in York with pained surprise, as everybody is more or less interested in the camp, and during its progress many people of this section practically make the ground their headquarters for some days as a wholesome retreat from the heat and dust of the city.

George R. Prowell. 1907. *History of York County*

“Emig’s Grove Campmeeting Association organized in 1880, met regularly for nearly twenty years, in a beautiful grove on the east side of the railroad midway between Mount Wolf and Emigsville. (History of York County, John Gibson 1886, locates the grounds one mile south of Mount Wolf Station). The association purchased fourteen acres of land from John Emig and afterward bought thirteen more. Large wooden cottages (Gibson describes excellent board tents) were erected in the form of a semi-circle, amid the deep shades of this beautiful grove. Campmeetings for religious services were held during the month of August under auspices of the United Brethren in Christ (Gibson also lists other Evangelical churches). The bishop of this denomination and other prominent clergymen took an active part in these annual meetings. The cottages and other buildings were burned in 1896 and the same year the campmeeting was removed to Penn Grove near Hanover.”

History of St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church, from a 1964 interview with Harry Aughenbaugh:

“The railroad made the campgrounds a stop for the convenience of its passengers. There was a small platform and a sort of arbor or archway that marked the campground stop.”

Do you remember Emig's Grove? Do you have old family photographs, newspaper clippings, family stories about meeting at the grove? If you do, we'd like to share your memories.

Contact us at ManTwpHistory@gmail.com

Manchester Township Historical Society

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