WASHINGTON IRVING'S COMMENT
ON AN EARLY NEW YORK
CAMP MEETING

By Elmer F. Suderman

The following description by Washington Irving (1783-1859) of an early New York camp meeting is taken from the Appendix of Volume IV of the Life and Letters of Washington Irving by his nephew, Pierre M. Irving. The Appendix—excerpts from the journal of Mrs. Dawson (Flora Foster)—was not originally intended for publication since it contained what Pierre considered some indecent and inaccurate comments on Washington Irving's purported love for and proposal to the younger Emily Fuller (Mrs. Dawson's niece). Pierre incorporates it with comments at the end of his fourth American volume of the Life. Mrs. Dawson's journal tells of Washington Irving's visit to Dresden, Germany, where he often visited in her home and in the home of her sister (Emily Foster Fuller, the mother of the younger Emily), entertaining them with reports of his life in New York.

Irving was nearly 40 years old when he visited the sisters in Dresden, and the camp meeting which he describes must have occurred between 1804 (when camp meetings first began in New York) and 1815 after which time Irving was in England and on the continent. It is, then, a description of one of the earlier camp meetings in the New York area, and is, therefore, of some value as the report of a perceptive and important American writer of this aspect of the development of Methodism in America in the early nineteenth century.

The comment gains in importance since it is an objective statement. Perhaps the tone of Irving's remarks is more important than the content. His description of the physical setting of the revival is repeated many times over in the literature concerning camp meetings, but the detached and objective comments of an Anglican who was not at this period in his life particularly interested in religion throws some light on the camp meetings. While Irving is obviously

3 Bishop Francis Asbury reported in 1805 'that perhaps two or three hundred 'camp and extraordinary meetings' had been hold, including a 'glorious one on Long Island.'" See Theodore L. Agnew, "Methodism on the Frontier," in The History of American Methodism, ed. Emory Stevens Bucko (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), I, 511.
4 I have discussed the treatment of the revival in late nineteenth-century fiction in Methodist History, V (January 1967), 17-30. To the best of my knowledge Irving made no literary use of the revival in his works.
not convinced of the value of the meetings, he is, on the other hand, not critical. He reports none of the excesses which are usually associated with the early camp meetings: rowdyism, highly emotionally charged preaching, and the accompanying jerks and other physical manifestations. He is impressed with the beauty of Methodist singing, and he does concede a certain impressiveness to the services. Perhaps this is due, at least in part, to the genial attitude of Irving, for he does not lose his good humor and interest even when he is addressed with something approaching scorn by the Negro at the meeting. His hope that the Negro had more faith than charity is characteristic of the grace and good humor of Irving's mouthpiece in the Sketchbook, Geoffrey Crayon. For these reasons and because it is now difficult to obtain, the account deserves to be reprinted as a valuable and interesting comment on the early Methodist camp meeting.

Mr. Irving and the Methodists on the Hudson

February 13th, 1823.—Mr. Irving came home with us after the opera, which is always over early, and stayed a long while talking as usual, before he wished "good night." He was exceedingly entertaining, and gave us a vivid description of the gatherings of the Methodists in America, which occur from time to time, and at one of which he was present. "These gatherings were generally on a spot particularly well suited to the occasion. Mr. Irving described it as a promontory or peninsula which spread itself out in an expansion of the Hudson, carpeted with verdure, and shaded by groves of splendid trees, while the whole is backed by mountain scenery of great beauty. Here thousands of persons are assembled from different parts of America, and remain encamped for three or four days."

As Mr. Irving approached the place, he said he saw "innumerable rows of carriages, wagons, &c., standing round; and the sound of female voices, singing in chorus, struck most pleasantly on his ear. Persons of this sect pay particular attention to their vocal music; and the psalms thus chanted in the open air, by voices of great power and sweetness, had a solemn and a thrilling effect. Some favorite preachers were surrounded by immense congregations, while others drew a smaller number of hearers round them;
but many of them would suddenly stop, and launch into severe anathemas against any unfortunate strangers whose more elegant dress\(^6\) would show them to be mere spectators of the scene. In other parts of the grove, processions would be seen moving slowly and solemnly along—elders of the tribes leading their flocks to this holy place of meeting, and occasionally halting to offer up a short but fervent prayer. But the whole has such a striking effect, that many persons are converted at the moment—or fancy themselves so. The black population throng to these places as much as the white;\(^7\) and young girls would fall down senseless, and lay so for some time; “for,” says Mr. Irving, “it requires a great struggle to send the devil out of a negro; but when they are once turned Methodists, they are the most sturdy in their doctrine.”

Irving said, “that he passed a group of negroes, an old white-headed man, and several old black women standing by him, who looked upon him with great contempt. The old man, casting a look over his shoulder, ejaculated: ‘Ay’ (here mentioning the name of our holy Savior), ‘ay, He will carry the day!’\(^8\) as if he were speaking of an election; and then added: ‘If God Almighty were not too strong for the devil’ (here another fierce and sidelong look at Mr. Irving), ‘there would be no living in the’arth!’ We hope his faith was greater than his charity, and wished him an increase of the latter article.”


\(^7\) Negroes had been a prominent part of the camp meeting since the first really large one at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, where there was a worship “center for Negroes with Negro exhorters.” Agnew, op. cit., I, 512. Early Methodist Circuit Rider journals report the presence of Negroes at the camp meetings. See Sweet, op. cit., 77 et passim. Later in the century the term Negro camp meeting became prominent enough to find a place in the Dictionary of Americanisms. Whether the Negroes described by Washington Irving were free or slave is not certain, but in 1800 there were still 36,505 Negro slaves in the East, most of them in New York and New Jersey. Leon F. Litwack, North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 3.