The American camp meeting is almost two hundred years old. In those two centuries of service this institution has helped weave the fabric of American religion. The camp meeting itself has gone through many changes, and has been used successfully as a tool for revivalism, education, church planting, church growth, mission, social action, reform movement, political action and even community development.

There are a number of misconceptions about the camp meeting which have developed over the years. Some of the more prominent fallacies are these:

1. The camp meeting was first developed by the Presbyterians.
2. The very first camp meeting, or the first "planned" camp meeting was held at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1800 or 1801.
3. The first camp meeting was held in either 1799 or 1800.
4. The first camp meetings always moved about from place to place and had no sense of permanency.
5. The camp meeting reached its zenith sometime in the middle, or sometime at the end of the nineteenth century.
6. The camp meeting as we know it is dying out.
7. The camp meeting movement was replaced by the Chautauqua movement.
8. The camp meeting has been entirely a Methodist institution.

Unfortunately, these erroneous ideas have continued through the years, and occasionally still make their appearance in some scholarly text. Historians have long disagreed as to the origins of the camp meeting. Charles A. Johnson has said that the problem is mainly definition and has suggested several antecedents including the outdoor preaching of Whitefield and the Wesleys. More specifically, he included the outdoor sacramental services on the American frontier, some of which dated as early as 1769, and which included the Methodist quarterly meetings.\(^1\) Johnson helped perpetuate the myth about origins. Although he claimed the date for the first camp meeting unimportant, he wrote, "In the year 1800 the camp meeting sprang into being, was almost instantly universalized along the southwestern frontier, and almost as rapidly standardized into a pattern."\(^2\)

\(^2\)Ibid., 40.
Finding America's Oldest Camp Meeting

Unfortunately, many scholars have accepted Johnson's authority without question. Some of his conclusions need re-evaluation. For example, the 1794 outdoor revival at Daniel Asbury's Rehobeth Methodist Church in Lincoln County, North Carolina, has been considered as the first camp meeting ever held. Johnson disputed and denied this. However, the evidence indicates that this meeting, commonly called "Gassy Branch Camp Meeting," and now listed on the national register of Methodist historic sites, was indeed one of the very first camp meetings.

Daniel Asbury (no documented relation to Francis Asbury) received appointment to the Lincoln Circuit in 1790, found a group of Methodists living near the present town of Terrell, North Carolina, and organized them into the first Methodist society west of the Catawba River. Having no building, the congregation worshipped on the banks of the Gassy Branch Creek, calling themselves the Gassy Branch Methodist Church. In 1794, three years after the completion of their log church house, the congregation conducted a six-day revival with Daniel Asbury, William McKendree and others doing the preaching. People gathered from miles around, and the crowds grew so large that a brush arbor was built and the services held outside. Many slept in their wagons that night and then decided to stay the entire week, camping right on the grounds.

Obviously this was no "planned" camp meeting. Events arose out of the necessity of the hour. However, the same cannot be said for a meeting held at the same place the next year and the year after that. The congregations grew so large that in 1798 the meeting moved to a location near Denver, North Carolina. A few years later the camp moved to "Robey's campground," still near the little town of Denver. In 1829 relocation occurred again, this time to a forty-five acre plot called "Rock Springs Camp Ground," and the meeting has been held there annually since that time.3

While it must be admitted that the revival of 1794 was not a planned camp meeting, those that followed certainly were. The meetings were held at the same location, even from the beginning, and when moved, the camp still had permanency to it. The leaders associated with this encampment later carried the idea to other localities with great success. Methodist preachers John McGee and William McKendree both attended Gassy Branch camp meeting in 1794, and both became prominent leaders in the camp meeting movement as it gained national attention.

There is still more evidence that points to an earlier date for the founding and standardization of the camp meeting than scholars have allowed. The Cypress Camp Meeting, located near Ridgeville, Dorchester

County, South Carolina, was established in October, 1794, and local historians date two nearby camp meetings, Cattle Creek and Indian Field, almost as early. The Effingham County Camp Meeting in Springfield, Georgia, may date as early as 1790. The original brush arbor was built on Turkey Branch Creek by a Methodist preacher, the Reverend Gideon Mallett. The campground was burned by Union soldiers during Sherman's famous "march to the sea," but local residents rebuilt it and the meeting is still held each year.

This evidence suggests that a reinterpretation of the origins of the camp meeting is needed. It would appear that the institution was founded, standardized and perhaps even popularized by Methodists in the deep south a decade earlier than scholars have supposed. Furthermore, it would appear that this work was done by Methodists in the Carolinas and Georgia, not Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists in Kentucky and Tennessee. This research takes nothing away from the great revival in the west, especially the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting of 1801. That revival served as a catalyst to catapult the camp meeting on to the national religious scene. But those meetings were not the genesis of this institution; that honor belongs to the deep south.

There is a continuing debate these days about which camp meeting is the oldest in continuous existence in America. Hollow Rock Camp Meeting, near Steubenville, Ohio, has claimed to be the "oldest Camp Meeting in Existence." It is not the first to make that erroneous claim, but with a founding year of 1818 it simply is not old enough. The Sing Sing Camp Meeting in New York (now called Ossining) dates to 1805, Felder's Campground in Mississippi dates to 1810, and Jonesville Camp Meeting in Virginia dates to 1810. These, plus the five named earlier, must be considered before Hollow Rock.

It would seem at this point that the oldest camp meeting is either Cypress, South Carolina, Effingham, Georgia, or Rock Springs, North Carolina. All three date from the 1790's and have a continuous stream of service. It may be that there is a camp meeting as old or older than these, but it has not yet been found. (If you know of one, please do not hesitate to write the author.)

4 Correspondence between Cypress Camp Meeting and author. Correspondence with Dr. J. Gavin Appleby, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Indian Field Camp Meeting. Doug Scott, "Indian Field Camp Meeting," unpublished historical paper. A brief history of Indian Field appears in the Encyclopedia of World Methodism (I, 1208), but the founding date is wrong.

5 See 1989 brochure of Effingham County Camp Meeting; N. Hinton Morgan, "History of the Camp Ground," unpublished historical paper; correspondence with the Reverend Ernest W. Seckinger, Sr., historian of Effingham County Camp Meeting.