Religious fervor in Western Pennsylvania expresses itself in many ways, from prominent stone cathedrals to modest frame churches tucked away in rural areas. One manifestation, the camp meeting ground, grew out of a religious revival in the nineteenth century.

During the American Revolution, skepticism crept into many areas of life including religion. As a reaction to these doubts, a reawakening of religious piety began in Kentucky in the 1790s and spread to Western Pennsylvania. John Walker Dinsmore described a local revival in his 1906 book about the Scotch-Irish in America:

In the woods around the old log meeting house at Upper Buffalo was what probably was the most remarkable camp meeting ever known in America. It was in October, 1802, when the surrounding country was, as yet, sparsely settled and still mostly a vast forest. Yet there gathered together in the wilderness a concourse of above ten thousand people, coming from distances within a radius of a hundred miles; on foot, on horseback, in clumsy vehicles, bringing provisions with them and tarrying for many days.

A second awakening after the Civil War concentrated more on reviving one’s “holiness,” than making converts. The design of these later camp meeting grounds, the ones surviving in Western Pennsylvania, were often copied from those of B.W. Gorham who published an ideal site plan and camp meeting manual.

This 19th century form of worship has begun to attract the attention of architectural historians interested in vernacular studies. There are at least a dozen documented camp meeting grounds in thirty-three counties of Western Pennsylvania and there are probably more camps and remnants of camps that are undetected. They range in size from 10 to over 200 hundred acres.

In Mount Lebanon, several houses surrounding a cul-de-sac are older than the majority of homes in the suburb. They were built as part of the Arlington Park Methodist Camp Meeting founded in 1874 and in operation until 1886. The large frame structures were built in the Carpenter’s Gothic mode popular in the 1870s. Today, this remnant of a camp meeting is incorporated into the suburban fabric, but in the 1880s it was isolated in its rural setting.

In the surrounding counties, there are camp meeting grounds that also include tabernacles, large open wooden buildings used to gather the faithful before the pulpit. They are the focal point of the camp and ringed by cabins grouped in circles, rectangles, or horseshoe shapes. Simply built, often by farmers using barn-building techniques, they most often have gable roofs and folding doors along three sides that can open to the breezes in the summer and shut out the rain and wind on inclement days. In three cases, we know the builder or designer: N. B. Hixon built the 1888 tabernacle at the Crystal Spring Camp Meeting in Fulton County; George Yohe, an architect from Monongahela in
Washington County designed the 1907 tabernacle at the Bentleyville Union Holiness Camp Meeting Association; and engineer-minister David McDowell designed the 1939 Assemblies of God tabernacle on the grounds of the Living Waters Christian Camp in Indiana County. In these spaces, preachers or “exhorters” whipped the congregations into evangelical frenzies or at the very least reminded them of how to live righteously during the rest of the year.

The spare frame cottages that are small and closely spaced are intended to remind campers that their activities have an impact on the larger world; they are part of a community, not worshipping God in isolation. Their limited dimensions force the residents outside where they can appreciate the harmony of God and nature. The emphasis on communality encourages adult campers to be models of good behavior to both newcomers and youngsters alike. The camps support dormitory buildings, dining halls, and sometimes general stores and post offices depending on their isolation. These aspects of everyday life are most often on the fringes farthest from the sacred tabernacles so as not to distract from the afternoon and evening services.

Revivals last from 10 to 20 days, usually late in the summer to accommodate rural campers at a time between harvest and planting. Many families continue to attend their denomination’s yearly camp meeting even though today they may arrive in a Winnebago camper.

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