

THE LONG ROAD TO MECHUWANA
(Reminiscences about how we got there)

by
Elwin L. Wilson

I. Before a road was even considered.

Seeds of the idea of church camping may have been present in the minds of youth in a nineteenth century church during a long adult-oriented sermon on a beautiful summer day with sunshine and flowers and birds calling from beyond the stained glass windows. No one was conscious that the seeds were there until those youth of the early days became adults. But eventually they showed signs of germinating.

Of course the Sunday School had been there from the times of the beginnings of Methodism. The Methodist leaders had always been concerned about education as well as about religious fervor and service to the needy; and the Sunday School provided a special opportunity for adults to help children and youth to gain skills in all three areas.

Youth work in Protestant churches, however, received a new impetus from the formation of the Christian Endeavor Society. Founded by Rev. Francis E. Clark at Williston Congregational Church in Portland, Maine, in the year 1881, it was graded for different ages of youth for stimulating their Christian life and training them for their duties as Christians. By the middle of the twentieth century its membership, worldwide, was estimated to be as high as three million members. Youth work, as such, in many Methodist churches began with a Christian Endeavor Society. It has a special meaning for me, personally, as I met my future wife, Dorothy Clarke, at a Christian Endeavor Convention which we, as students at Bates College, attended in Portland in the year 1922.

About eight years after the Christian Endeavor Society was formed, the Epworth League was established in the Methodist Denomination. It was named for the town in England where John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born and spent his early boyhood. Its organizations were formed in a rapidly increasing number of local churches

and a denominational publication for youth, the *Epworth Herald*, was immediately popular.

Perhaps the statement of purpose of the Epworth League sounds strange to our ears in 1980 but we understand its import. “The object of the League is to promote intelligent and loyal piety in the young members and friends of the church, to aid them in the attainment of purity of heart and in constant growth in grace, and to train them in works of mercy and help.” In less than three years the League had about eight thousand chapters with a membership of four hundred thousand.

In most situations weekly meetings of the League were held on Sunday evenings with a rather formal worship service and some inspirational and/or educational program. These meetings generally were not confined to any specific age group and many adults of different ages became a part of the organization. Much of the leadership was adult. I well remember helping conduct the meetings in my home church in Bethel, Maine, when growing up, and it was probably there that I got my first inclinations toward the Christian ministry.

Very soon after the formation of the Epworth League a similar organization, the Junior Epworth League was formed - and in some instances there might also be an Intermediate Epworth League. In most cases the senior League would be for high school age and above, the intermediate for seventh and eighth grades and the junior for the grade school level. These organizations filled a need in the lives of youth and many of the church leaders of a half-century later were the products of the Leagues' fellowship and training.

II. First steps towards camp.

State and district Epworth League Conventions were organized in many areas, bringing youth from scattered local churches to find new acquaintances and experiences together. They would meet with their leaders at a host church, usually for a day or a weekend. But the first real steps toward Methodist camping were the Epworth League Institutes - several days for representative youth from a particular geographic area in a campground or school situation. At the 1914 Maine Annual Conference the three ministerial members of the Committee on Epworth League urged "the establishment of an Epworth League Institute or District Institutes for the young people of our Conference where the ideals and work of this important organization may be clearly set forth and inspiration kindled for larger involvement."

Some of the old camp meeting grounds were first used for this purpose - Empire Grove, Jacksonville, Littleton and others. These grounds had cottages which could be used for housing, some kind of kitchen and dining facilities and places for meetings. By 1921 an Institute for youth of the Maine Conference-was held at Kents Hill School and from about the same time one for the East Maine Conference was held at the East Maine Conference Seminary in Bucksport. Rev. Louis S. Staples, reporting for the Epworth League for the Maine Conference in the spring of 1922 expressed a popular viewpoint: "The greatest work being done, we believe, in Maine is the Epworth League Institute. With the largest Institute in New England, our registration being 343, the effective work done... we recommend that all the preachers of the Maine Conference resolve that every charge will be represented by delegates at the Institute to be held at Kent's Hill August 7-13, 1922."

In 1925 the Maine Conference and the East Maine Conference of the (then) Methodist Episcopal Church united to form a combined Maine Conference. Epworth League Institutes were continued at both Kent's Hill and Bucksport. The leadership for

these Institutes came mostly from within the Conference but at times was supplemented by workers from the Board of Education in Nashville, Tennessee, or from some neighboring conference. The leaders and youth gradually discovered that there would be advantages in a less institutionalized and more informal setting with a closer contact with nature and an opportunity for water sports, campfires, trail hikes, etc. They also learned much that would be helpful later in camping situations.

III. Camping along the way.

The Y.M. and Y.W.C.A., Boy and Girl Scouts, pioneered in camping for youth in the State of Maine. By 1915 the State Y.M.C.A. under the leadership of its General Secretary, the energetic and popular Jeff Smith, had established a State Y.M.C.A. Boy's Camp on Lake Cobbossecontee at East Winthrop. A few years later the Portland Y.M.C.A. established North Star Camp in Waterboro on Lake Ossipee. Camp Tanglewood at Lincolnville Beach was the property of the Y.W.C.A. of Bangor - these and others were developing methods and skills for effective camping for youth.

Methodist workers with youth discovered that it might be possible to have the use of some of these camps for a few days or a week before the opening or after the close of the regular camping season. On the last week of August, 1938, the first Junior High Camp was held at North Star Camp. Rev. Herman D. Berlew, Director of the Wesley Foundation at the University of Maine and pastor of the church in Orono served as Dean and Rev. Clifford H. Osborne, Minister of Congress Street Church in Portland and later Chaplain and Professor of Religion at Colby College, was in charge of program. The faculty included Bertram and Ruth Wentworth, Elwin and Dorothy Wilson, Lawrence Hathorne, Helen Gould Swett, Marjorie Griffin Rowe, and Ralph and Lucille Barron.

It was at this camp that the name MECHUWANA was first used. It was a combined form of the words, **ME**thodist **CH**urch **WA** (an Indian name for deity) and

Nature. The Director reported to the 1939 Annual Conference that there were 32 campers and 14 members of the faculty. He reported that the camp was a great success and added, "The campers this year are enthusiastic promoters of Camp Mechuwana and we anticipate a doubled enrollment for the coming season." The 1939 camp was indeed a success and the next year, 1940, a second Junior High Camp was held at Camp Roosevelt, a Scout camp at East Eddington.

In 1939 there was another camping experiment. In cooperation with the Congregational Church in Maine, and with the support of the Maine Council of Churches, an older youth weekend was conducted at the State Y.M.C.A. Camp. A weekend was chosen to accommodate the youth from 18 to 21 years of age who might be employed. This camp was well attended and by popular demand was continued the following year with Elwin Wilson, then minister at Biddeford, as Dean.

The results in these camps were so rewarding that Methodist youth leaders began thinking seriously about the future of camping in Maine. We had learned a great deal locally and the Board of Education in Nashville which had been studying the whole field of camping gave us assistance by loaning us Miss Clarice M. Bowman of its staff for a series of conferences and leadership training sessions in 1939. She spent two days of planning with our Camp Commission. (Some years later Miss Bowman became Professor of Christian Education at Bangor Theological Seminary and a ministerial member of the Maine Conference of the Methodist Church in 1965.)

In 1940 two changes were made in Methodism which we should note as we move on chronologically. The traditional name in America, the Methodist Episcopal Church, was simplified to become simply the THE METHODIST CHURCH. And the Epworth League met its official demise or more properly, became the METHODIST YOUTH FELLOWSHIP, with age group divisions as formerly developed in the Epworth League.

In 1942, on the initiative of Rev. Herman D. Berlew of Orono a student camp was conducted successfully at the Bangor Y.W.C.A. Camp at Lincolnville Beach. And

Methodist high school age youth had their first conference-wide camping experience June 20 to 26, 1943, at the State Y.M.C.A. Camp prior to the opening of its season, when the previous Institutes were combined there. Rev. Edwin F. Tewksbury, then minister at Auburn, served as Dean.

Little by little we were getting nearer our goal.

IV. Search and discovery.

With the value of youth camps so well established it was inevitable that we should start considering a longer and more diversified camping season. This would, it seemed, require a camping location which could be used at will throughout the summer months. And how could this be achieved unless the Conference owned a camp? Long study_ and discussion finally became action.

On Saturday morning, May 25, 1946, at a session of the Annual Conference, in considering the possibility of a summer assembly site it was moved and voted that a committee of nine, three from each District, four of whom shall be laymen, be appointed by the chair in consultation with Lay Leader Lowell E. Bailey and the Conference Executive Secretary, this committee to report before adjournment.” Herber F. Aldrich, Clifford B. Osborne, C.M. White, Lester L. Boobar, Fred P. Loring, Cliton D. Baldwin, Elwin L. Wilson, Edwin F. Tewksbury and Miss Margaret Currie were appointed.

That afternoon Mr. Loring (a Professor in the College of Agriculture at the University of Maine and member of the Orono church) reported for the committee. It recognized the desirability of the Annual Conference acquiring and developing a summer assembly-site. It recommended that a committee composed of specified officers and chairmen “be appointed to investigate the site at Phippsburg and other possible locations, and that this committee be empowered to act in the raising of funds and purchase of a suitable location.”

The Phippsburg property referred to was a shore lot owned by Rev. Chester B. Oliver who had suggested that this might be a suitable place for the camp to be located. On being investigated by the committee it received general approval. Other locations were also sought and considered.

And then, fortunately, the committee received information that a Camp Naomi, on Lower Narrows Lake in the Town of Winthrop was on the market. The manager of this camp had recently lost his life in a fire which had destroyed the cabin in which he was sleeping while alone at the camp. We visited the camp and were enthusiastic about its possibilities. A large lodge with huge stone fireplace had a kitchen, office, and main room large enough for dining or assemblies for one hundred campers or more. There was a wide porch on two sides, facing the lake and space underneath which could be used for storage or even staff sleeping quarters. In addition there were four separate wooden cabins on the lakeshore.

On April 19, 1948, one year from the time the committee was appointed, it recommended to the Annual Conference "that it authorize the purchase of the camp and site at Winthrop, Maine, now under consideration, subject to the clearing of the title to the satisfaction of the Conference Trustees.

It was originally assumed that the property would be held by the Conference Trustees, an already incorporated body of the Conference. But the Trustees, commissioned to hold and invest funds for the Conference, its organizations and local churches, felt it would be unwise to add real estate to their holdings, so it was later decided that a Camp Commission should be elected and incorporated to specifically hold and administer the camp property.

The committee as set up the previous year with the addition of Mrs. Philip I. (Nellie) Milliken was continued "to arrange for the purchase of the property and to raise funds for that purpose, and that it be asked to administer the camp until such time as the Camp Commission is set up.

V. We arrive at our camp.

On April 19, 1948, the Campsite Committee held a meeting at the Green Street Methodist Church in Augusta. The following members were present: H.F. Aldrich, C.H. Osborne, Jesse Kenderdine, L.L. Boobar, E.L. Wilson, L.S Staples, A.I. Oliver, C.D. Wentworth, Cymbrid Hughes, E. F. Tewksbury, (all ministers); Mr. Lowell Bailey and Mrs. H.V. Tweedie.

The chairman stated the purpose of the meeting after which Mr. Dickey, the owner of the camp was introduced. It was "agreed" by "vote" that the committee negotiate with Mr. Dickey for the purchase of the entire camp site including the forty acres on the other side of the highway and that it offer Mr. Dickey the amount of \$19,000.00 for it.

Mr. Dickey eventually agreed and the Annual Conference approved the action at its session of May 12-16, 1948. That conference also authorized the Permanent Fund Commission, which was organizing a conference-wide campaign for pension funds, to include in its asking \$25,000.00 for the purchase of the camp.

Mrs. Evelyn Dickey who had really controlled the property, later reduced the cost of the camp by \$1,000.00 when, with the assistance of Conference Trustees, the Preachers' Aid Society, the Woman's Home Missionary Society and the Deaconess Board, the mortgage was paid in full at an early date.

Mr. Aldrich, reporting for the Campsite Committee, moved that the Commission to control the camp property be elected and incorporated as the Maine Methodist Conference Camp Commission and it was so voted. The members of the Commission were elected as follows (with some details concerning each appended):

VI. Members of the Camp Commission

Herbert F. Aldrich became a member of the Conference in 1923, held pastorates at West Paris, Winthrop, Caribou, Brewer and Phillips, and was District Superintendent of the Augusta District, 1941-46.

Lowell E. Bailey, an active layman of the North Anson church was the Lay Leader of the Conference.

Herman A. Grant joined the Conference in 1917, held pastorates at Derby, Washburn, Smyrna Mills, Dover-Foxcroft and Presque Isle and was serving as Conference Director of Evangelism.

Jesse Kenderdine came from the Minnesota Conference in 1927 and held pastorates at Rockland, Fort Fairfield, Westbrook, Bath and Brewer. He was currently pastor at Livermore Falls and Chairman of the Conference Board of Ministerial Training.

Irving V. Maxwell was a Portland Attorney, a member of the Chestnut Street Church Portland and very helpful in legal matters of the Conference and the Conference Trustees.

Nellie Milliken (Mrs. Philip I.) A member of the Clark Memorial church in Portland was chairman of the Conference Deaconess Board. Both the Millikens were connected with Canal Bank and very helpful in Conference Trustees matters. (Both were still living at their home, 11 Berkeley St. Portland, when this paper was written in 1980.)

Louis S. Staples who joined the Conference in 1914 served as minister at Berwick, Portland (Washington Ave.), Kittery, Livermore Falls, South Paris, Bangor First,

Gardiner, Clark Memorial (Portland), and was currently District Superintendent of the Bangor District.

Edwin F. Tewksbury, joining in 1933 had served at Prospect Harbor, Mattawamkeag, Orrington, Woodland and Auburn and (1948) was Conference Executive Secretary of the Boards of Education and Missions.

Mrs. H.V. Tweedie was a member of the Rockland church and was serving as its Lay Member at the Annual Conference.

Elwin L. Wilson, 1927, served at West Scarborough, Westbrook, Elm St. (So. Portland), and Biddeford, District Superintendent of the Portland District 1942-47 and Pastor at Orono in 1948. He was then President of the Conference Board of Education.

Immediately after election the Camp Commission in turn elected its own officers:

President, *Herbert F. Aldrich*

Vice President, *Elwin L. Wilson*

Clerk, *Edwin F. Tewksbury*

Treasurer, *Nellie P. Milliken*

Irving Maxwell was authorized and immediately proceeded to secure incorporation by the State.

VII. We go to work at camp.

The Camp Commission met frequently that first summer and fall, some of the sessions being held at the camp. In one of its first actions it set up two important committees, a Property committee to have charge of the physical aspects of the camp and a Program and Camp Management Committee.

It had the value of the property appraised by competent parties who reported that the value of the buildings and equipment was "just under \$30,000.00." They were immediately insured for \$20,000.00 - more than was paid for the whole camp.

The committee received notice that a lot of land at the end of the property near Upper Narrows Lake had previously been taken for taxes by the Town of Winthrop and was now being offered for sale. The Commission purchased, partly for the protection of the camp property, the price being \$115.00. A shore lot on Lake Annabessacook was also purchased for \$250.00 to make the shoreline on that side of the Camp property complete.

No major changes were made in the property that year but plans were studied and set in motion for the spring of 1949. Volunteers from various churches made a general clean-up of buildings and surroundings, improved the road, installed a new water pump and made minor repairs. Before the camp was put in operation the next year two new lodges and boys toilet facilities were constructed

VIII. We begin to attend camp sessions.

On June 13, 1949, the first group to officially use the camp facilities arrived, the Annual Pastors' School. Then followed in rapid succession:

Senior High Camp	June 18 - July 2
Junior High Camp	July 2 - July 16
Woman's Society of Christian Service	July 18 - July 22
Church School Superintendents	July 23 - July 24
Leadership Training School	July 25 - July 29
Junior Camp	July 30 - Aug 13
Board of Lay Activities	Aug. 13 – Aug 14
Adult Camp	Aug. 15 – Aug. 21
Junior High Camp	Aug 21 – Aug 27
Senior Youth Leadership Camp	Aug 27 – Sept 2
Young Adult Weekend	Sept. 3 – Sept. 5
Wesley Foundation	Sept. 9 – Sept. 11

It was reported that there were 843 campers during the season. Rev. Edwin F. Tewksbury, Executive Secretary of the *Pcards* of Education and Missions for the Conference, was the camp Director and was in residence (with his wife, Edith) at the camp for thirteen weeks during the preparation of the camp and the camping season. This was his last year in Maine as he accepted a position with the Board of Education of the Methodist Church and moved to its offices in Nashville, Tennessee, before the next camping season. Rev. G. Duncan Moores replaced him as Executive Secretary and Camp Director in the 1950 programs.

Rev. Lester L. Boobar, in reporting for this first camping year wrote, "May say that after one year of operation all those who have had contact with the camp and its program are enthusiastic about the location, the excellent facilities and the great possibilities for the future.

So, finally, we had arrived at Mechuwana.

IX. Recall, after thirty years.

Three decades of crowded camp schedules have passed and wherever one goes among the Methodist Churches of Maine one finds adult leaders who look back gratefully to experiences at Camp Mechuwana which did much to inspire and educate them for their present place of leadership in the Christian community.

The wear and tear of thirty years have taken their toll of the old buildings and equipment and there have been continuing dreams of expanded services. While many changes and improvements have been made through the years including the construction of a beautiful chapel) a really major advance was made in the year 1979. Funds were raised throughout the Conference for a new kitchen-dining-office facility.

By early 1980 the new building had been completed. Since many of the three-year pledges were of course not yet paid it became necessary to borrow funds to pay the contractors. In checking the titles of the land as a basis for securing a bank mortgage, it was found that the title to the property had never been transferred from the original Camp Commission to the present Commission on Property which is commissioned to hold all real estate for the Conference.

About the first of February (1980) I received a phone call from the Conference office giving me this information and also informing me that the last election of officers of the Camp Commission was held in 1948 when Herbert F. Aldrich was elected President and Elwin L. Wilson Vice President. State law provided that officers of

corporations hold their offices until their successors are elected. So, since all the members of the original Camp Commission are deceased except Nellie Milliken and myself, and since as Vice President no one had ever been elected to succeed me, it became my pleasant duty to sign the necessary document to transfer the ownership of the camp to the Commission on Property where it belongs.

So on February 9, Rev. Howard E. Benson, District Superintendent of the Northern District, brought the legal papers and they were promptly signed, notarized and returned to the Winthrop office.

It was this experience, at age 81, which sent my thoughts back through the years and my fingers back to the old Conference Year Books as I tried to reconstruct the long road by which we came to Mechuwana.

Those of us who had the opportunity to participate in the founding and ongoing life of the camp are gratified by the results and are proud to have contributed to such an important enterprise in the life of our church.

Elwin L. Wilson
113 Forest Avenue
Orono, Maine 04473