**Camp Meribah Holds Enduring History Forevermore (3 parts)**

With 2019 as the 50th anniversary of Camp Meribah, there was much celebration in Hickman County. Bill McDonald delivered a beautiful and historical narrative of the camp on November 3, 2019 at the Centerville Church of Christ. Moreover, local resident David Talley has composed a wonderful account of the history of Meribah. Ward Mayberry has been a Camp board member for decades, and he has constructed several first-rate cabins. The camp carries deep history that is focused within a zenith of primary events. Yet, the story is one that is comprised of five decades of the passion of many crusaders.

Hundreds of hard-working individuals have generously given great swaths of personal time to evolve this camp as grand. The four-week summer camp sponsored by Centerville Church of Christ is a palatial natural area with much harmony and devotion. In this 3-part series, we will highlight a few names that brought Meribah to prominence yet knowing this special enclave was created through a large effort of numerous involved volunteers. The deep history of half a century is far-reaching and continues a quest for Christian outreach. I have taken photographs over the last decade of the camp in every season, and my favorites are frames of the ‘hills and hollows’ after a winter snow, as one can view the lay of the land as predominant. I love driving down the main corridor entrance framed by the tall, white pines in an exalted setting.

This region of our county was foremost a home for indigenous Indians, who lived under rock ‘cleft’ shelves and encompassed full ownership of the wild and pristine lands and streams. In the 1950s, before Meribah became reality, a man (Turnbow) dwelled in a home in Spring Hollow and engaged in the moonshine business. He also profited from his wagon, horses and gambling. His private domain was beside a creek and Spring on present-day camp property; and his life moved along day-by-day in this peaceful and tranquil setting.

When a fellow gambler cheated Turnbow in his home, there were 2 resultant gunshots. One shot was for the dishonest man and the other for his friend. Mr. Turnbow loaded the bodies into a wagon and covered them in car tires and hay. The deceased were then transported through the Centerville Square and onto a logging road near Swan Creek where they were burned with kerosene. A young and advancing physician Dr. Parker Elrod matched the x-ray to the culprit and cracked the case wide open. As a consequence, Mr. Turnbow died in prison. The land was sold for taxes and later purchased by Hartie Lee Coble, Register of Deeds for 32 years. Hartie Lee then became the prime benefactor for the gift of land designed for a Christian camp.

On December 7, 1967, a 20-year old Bill McDonald was present at a Planning Session at Montgomery Bell State Park led by Paul Rogers, who proposed a future spiritual camp for boys and girls. Hartie Lee Coble spoke up relating ‘I have some good land near the church’, and the seed was planted. On January 30, 1968, Hartie Lee and Georgia Coble officially donated 158 prime acres in benefaction for a newly formed Christian Camp. Mrs. Claude Stephenson graciously later donated an additional 40 acres. A 60-acre addition bequeathed to camp property was further finalized in 1979.

Paul Rogers was ahead of his time with an early and grand vision for the Centerville Church of Christ that included Tulipwood, a Bible School for 1000 children, and a Christian camp.

One of the first orders of business was to establish a pathway through these dense woods. Ed Shepherd and Howard Gilliam forged a road with their bulldozer expertise to create the stunning White Pine Drive on site today. Ed Shepherd was the mastermind of creating the present-day ballfields. Parker Elrod planted small saplings that are now majestic and tall trees in a scenic entrance.

The camp sought a namesake provided by Paul Rogers and Sammye Elrod, who were both fascinated by the streams, flora and fauna of this region. In Psalms, Exodus, Deuteronomy and Numbers, waters of Meribah are described as ‘a haven in nature inundated with a chasm of flowing channels.’ Sammye tendered many hours identifying 24 freshwater springs that ran into the hollow, and she catalogued 240 species of wildflowers in this natural habitat.

The property was originally part of the City Dump. Bill McDonald was on hand to witness the large efforts of Bill Kittrell utilizing cable controls to rid the site of the stoves, washing machines and dryers. Bill McDonald also labored to assist in rolling tires off the winding camp hill. Judy Rogers and Agnes Dotson, among other volunteers, pulled out tires and old appliances by hand in 1967.

The McDonald family were ‘front and center’ in developing Meribah from the earliest chapter of planning. Remarkably, Ken McDonald perished at 13 years old the day before camp commenced. His funeral was on a Sunday in 1969 with 900 in attendance. Ken was a very easy-mannered and kind young man and had worked at the camp weeks before the opening day. He also enrolled for the initial week of Meribah. Bill McDonald went on to camp just after his brother’s funeral to support the encampment Ken so loved. Camper David Elrod planted a sapling cedar on top of the camp ridge in Ken McDonald’s honor that stands today as a tall and exquisite tree. With an everlasting love for this Christian camp, the McDonald family donated the funds to build Ken McDonald Hall that was dedicated on November 5, 1970. The inner walls of this building have changed lives for better over 50 years.

Stay close at hand as we venture an exploration within part 2 of the legacy and majesty of Camp Meribah.

**Meribah is the Fruition of Innumerable Supporters**

So many individuals were illustrious in prime construction on the new camp site. In June 1968, a large cabin for boys was intact with the innovation of Kenneth Jenkins and Howard Gilliam, who was an overall major leader in the development of the emerging camp. An early namesake of “Lake Gilliam’ was designated in his honor. In February 1969, a two-level Boys’ Cabin was erected under the supervision and hands-on labor of Howard Gilliam and Bobby Bates. George Dotson and Lamar Chessor hammered many nails for construction of these cabins. Len Womack, who was employed in forestry for 30 years, was a large contributor to the camp. Walter Elrod (Chug), who gave endless hours of labor to Meribah, assembled and created a superb outdoor Chapel in the Woods for his nuptials. At 16 years old, my brother David Rogers was on hand one summer to assist with shrubs, flowers and meticulous transformation of this site into an astonishing venue for these vows. Yet, the rain poured freely, and the wedding was moved inside the Centerville Church of Christ. Afterward, this handsome and inviting open-air chapel was utilized for the next 50 years in numerous devotionals and is remembered with much love by every camper, who visits the pristine site. For decades during the Christmas season, Chug would illuminate a tall, stately tree on the hill facing Hickman Springs Road that was a real festive gift to the town of Centerville.

Numerous white pines were planted, brush cleared, and trails established by those progressive supporters, who desired to witness this newly designed encampment move forward. Over 60 truckloads of debris were hauled away, as the site came alive and inviting.

Camp was launched as a rustic, yet modern retreat on July 17, 1969 with 35 campers and a tuition of $25. Paul Rogers and Tim Walker were the very first directors. Tim declared this inaugural week was a ‘golden opportunity to utilize for all during the remaining nine months.’ Thereafter, Meribah was available from March through December.

During this exciting first week, Paul Rogers contacted photographer Joe Shipp in 1969 to come to the camp with his professional camera and snap pictures of the enclaves with children in devotionals, creating crafts and playing ball. These historical gems are archived within the Centerville Church of Christ today.

The initial assembly of camp necessitated a food plan; thus, Paul contacted Edward Breece of Breece’s Café to provide meals. In turn, Ed replied ‘I would be glad to cater.’ He loaded the food into a Ford station wagon and transported delicious suppers. These dinners were enjoyed by campers at the ball field, Spring Hollow and the Rock Quarry. In 1971, a kitchen was equipped and ready for business. In the early days, Shoneys furnished the kitchen installments in a first-class manner for campers.

During the very first camp session of 1969, a ‘joke’ was widespread and declared to the Girls’ cabins that an ‘escapee from Turney Prison was swimming Duck River on the way to camp. Be ready and be prepared.’ The ruse was carefully construed with the efforts of several male counselors, who used Breece’s ketchup as blood on the floor of the porch of Boys’ cabin as a ploy for the crime scene. Several campers were filled with terror. Yet, in the end, the ‘joke’ was not effective, and the snicker of the girls sitting at the picnic tables viewing this effort was the final word. They had the greatest show on earth.

Bill McDonald has been the heart and soul of Meribah from the first day. When I attended camp in the 1970s, he taught my Bible classes every year and was ‘front and center’ at every session through his teen and adult years. We had fun with Singing gatherings every day in the Ken McDonald Hall foyer where Bill brought his guitar and composed some enduring songs for campers. Bill continues as an active presence and speaker at Meribah in his 50th year of involvement.

Amidst three generations of camp, several marvelous directors have been on hand. These include Nick McNabb, Earl Lavender, Mike Bradley, Greg McCord, Clay Chessor, Paul Rogers, Craig Shelton, Teb Batey, and Buzzy Neil. David Craig was on site for 12 years. Robert ‘Buzzy’ Neil (1970), an elementary school teacher in Nashville, was the camp originator and long-time leader. Greg McCord and David Crai also held long tenures as camp directors in an expanding program. Buzzy, a creative and hands-on individual, was the prime director when I attended camp through the years; and Greg McCord was the leader when my children Katherine and Michael were campers. Each director had their own unique style and skills. Greg McCord was a comedian, and he also had a strong talent with Archery. Greg was employed long-term at Boys and Girls Club in Nashville and gained solid experience with organizing a first-rate camp. Directors and counselors served as role models and a positive influence, who touched untold young lives over five decades.

Work Detail was a daily set of chores for campers, who were assigned duties to maintain the camp. Cleaning cabins, restrooms and Ken McDonald Hall was a prime experience to make the encampment shine. Paul Rogers encouraged the affirmation that children and adults need to have a willingness and zeal to work and have a heart for mankind. He conveyed ‘busy hands accomplish great success.’ Paul also promoted character-building skills. The upper entrance signage proclaims ‘Building Boys is Better than Mending Men’, while the emblem for Lake Hollow professed ‘Invest in Youth that Pays Rich Dividends.’

Volunteers were ever-present during Craft hour, and quality materials were assembled for this endeavor. During my time, Teresa Dyer taught basket weaving, and Thelma Totty and Christine Huddleston were excellent Craft leaders.

Several campers moved on from Meribah to enter the business world on a high level. Dr. David Elrod was a General Manager of Arnold Air Force Base and toiled in an engineering career for 33 years. Zena McClanahan Akers is a longstanding Lead engineer for NASA in Huntsville, Alabama. Many campers sought degrees as teachers and have changed the world for better.

Camp is an ‘open door for all’ with a focus to glorify the Lord. Paul Rogers related his vision for the ‘children of the hill’ was to embrace each child with love. Teach children and they teach us. His desire was ‘one more to listen, love and become a child of God.’ Some campers from challenging circumstances arrived to Meribah only to learn new abilities on overcoming obstacles through example. Paul stated no one needed credit to accomplish this mission. He also related ‘go into the world and preach the Gospel to all. Do not become weary in doing good.’

**Camp Meribah is Revered as Sacred Retreat**

Meribah is comprised of 14 buildings that are all immersed in history. These structures include Ken McDonald Hall, Hayes Pavilion, Elrod/McCord Shelter, Paul Gentry Maintenance Facility, Hartie Lee Coble Outdoor Gym (1972), Miss Mabel’s Amphitheater, A-Frame Chapel, Lamar Chessor Cabin, and Wilmer Rogers Staff Lodge (1979). Mackendox Playground, a combination of a namesake for Mr. Mac and Dr. Parker Elrod, is also a sensation for outdoor recreation, along with the Dotson Ballfield. The lower entrance features the historical Rock embankment with marked hiking trails nearby. The Elrod/McCord Shelter at the Springs is next to the waterfall sparkling in a picturesque abode.

Dotson Lodge was an integral contribution completed in 2000. Entrepreneur Kenneth Dotson donated funds for construction in honor of Edward and Olgia Dotson; and the two-story edifice was erected as magnificent. Incredibly, an undetermined fire enflamed the lodge on Christmas Day 2001. Yet, with tremendous generosity of builder Paul Gentry of Mt. Juliet, Bobby Bates, Ward Mayberry and hard-working Turney Center inmates, the structure was rebuilt in 2002. The lodge houses up to 32 guests with a commercial kitchen and maintains a second floor with an enchanting view overlooking nature at its finest. My favorite feature of the lodge is the elegant stone fireplace in the first floor family room.

Bobby McCoy was the longstanding caretaker hired in 2006 and followed hard workers W.C. Hayes, a World War II veteran, along with wife Evelyn, who labored incredibly hard in the kitchen cooking fabulous meals for campers. Bobby was outstanding as Camp Superintendent and created a camp that shined in a magnificent manner. Bobby relates that Paul Rogers was meticulous with keen interest on every aspect of the camp. When Bobby prepared to trim a large cedar in front of Ken McDonald Hall, Paul, as preservationist, lended a watchful eye saying ‘less is better.’ Derick Newsom was appointed Camp Superintendent in 2014 and is leading the camp into the 21st Century.

In 1985, Meribah was remodeled. In 2004, four buildings and four shelters were established. This effort was all possible by those who have stepped forward with generous financial contributions. In 1969, Kenneth Wilson gave $5,000 for construction of a cabin in memory of Dr. Ogle Jones. In 1975, Maurice Rogers provided the funds for the A-Frame Chapel and has contributed every year to the camp with large donations, including new flooring of the A-Frame in 2019. Furthermore, anonymous gifts supported the camp time and time again to maintain the property so grand. In a modern-day summer enrollment, one-third of campers attend on scholarships. Philanthropic individuals give $10,000 to cover the cost of the tuition.

In my generation, Alice Coble Holbert, granddaughter of Hartie Lee Coble, embraced the camp experience more fully than anyone I have known. I began my quest in camp in 1970 and was baptized there at age 15 years old by my dad. Camp entailed a structured day of cleaning, devotionals, and fun. ‘Skit Night’ on Thursday evenings was comprised of the most innovative minds of counselors and campers. Before dining for lunch, a ‘dare’ was imitated to determine which cabin was first in line. In 1974, the dare that won the day was from a camper (Rippy) willing to drink raw eggs. In the early 1970s, the boys’ cabins were full; and the decision was made to place the overload into outside tents near the Chapel in the Woods. The signage was posted as ‘Tick City’; and camp quickly became a rugged adventure. Ticks, chiggers and snakes were alongside campers all week.

The timeline of the camp carried milestones. On March 1, 1971, the Middle Tennessee Preachers Forum was organized by Paul Rogers with 80 attendees arriving from 33 cities. At its peak, the assemblage of ministers totaled 400 in attendance. By 1994, 100,000 campers had enrolled in the summer sessions since 1969. In 2002, 328 campers were on the hill for summer camp; and 2014 was the largest teen week ever. There were 36 groups to utilize Meribah in 2017, and 44 groups reserved the Dotson Lodge. Currently, 4,000 utilize the facilities each year. Some congregations coordinate retreats and their own camps. The purpose for the camp is far-reaching with Grief Retreats, Scouts, family reunions, and weddings. In 1989, I organized a ‘Christian Singles Retreat Day’ in the A-frame Chapel that was a big success. Our speaker from Nashville was so impressed with the expanse of the wooded sanctuary. Ken McDonald Hall was our adjacent destination for our Singles luncheon and so accessible for a great day.

A new author will scribe the story of Camp Meribah in 50 years with a continued narrative. Thus, the history of this spiritual preserve is unfinished with more memories forthcoming in a passage to a new day.