Brief History of Sulphur Springs Camp Meeting grounds

The Sulphur Springs Camp Meeting Site and Shed has played a significant role in the establishment and perpetuation of the United Methodist Church throughout this Southern Appalachian region of the United States.

Bishop Francis Asbury, credited as the circuit-riding Methodist preacher who did the most to spread Methodism in frontier America, wrote in his Journal, dated September 16 and 17, 1802: *"...today we rode to Cashe's near Jonesborough, Tennessee. I attended a camp meeting which continued to be held for four days: there may have been fifteen hundred souls present."* Most likely Bishop Asbury attended several of the first camp meetings here. According to community oral history, it appears that Brush Arbor meetings were conducted here as early as 1802, as the frontier camp meeting movement spread following the Great awakening of that time. It was formally organized in 1820 and was usually held in late summer or early fall.

William Milburn, one of the founders of the Methodist Church in this area and a staunch abolitionist, had the idea to build a shed for the services along with a white framed church (which stood in what is now the parking lot and was subsequently torn down in the construction of the present church). The shed and old church were built in 1842 on this land purchased earlier from Payne Squibb for $100. The shed, essentially the same size and same place, as the present structure, was used until 1900 when it was replaced by the present shed. Some of the old hand-hewn logs from the first shed were incorporated into the present structure and can even be seen today. Both the 1842 and 1900 sheds were roofed with oak shingles, which was replaced in 1933 with tin after kerosene lamps were replaced with electric lights in 1930. The one-story, open-air, rectangular camp shed (74' x 45') with gables on hipped roof gives a sense of vertical lift, openness and focused reverence. Supported by hewn and pegged timber truss-work and slage unfinished plank pews, it rests on a packed earth and gravel floor.

Originally camp meetings lasted 4-5 days as Bishop Asbury noted. As the need for frontier religious and social expression evolved, the sessions began to last about three weeks, hence the name, "camp meeting". In the 1840's one by one families who traveled some distance saw the need for places to stay; and so several families, often two to a structure, built cabins in horseshoe formation around the shed to stay for the protracted camp meetings. These were later torn down as needs for them declined with shorter meetings around 1915. The families would arrive in wagons in advance of the meetings' openings and set up housekeeping in the cabins and tents around the hillside. Supplies and food (chickens to be killed and dressed and cows for milk supply among other items) were brought in.

There were usually three services a day — morning, afternoon and evening. The sounding of the ram's horn in Biblical fashion could be heard sum-moning folks to the shed. In some cases, two or three preachers might hold forth preaching to smaller groups outside the shed while the main meeting went on inside. Vibrant singing, testifying, shouting, parading up and down the aisles and all manner of "heartfelt" testifying accompanied the strong preaching. Religious at the core, camp meetings, nonetheless, were as much a social event as an evangelistic gathering, like a homecoming, family reunion, story-telling, gospel-singing and revival all rolled up into one.

Even today, the grounds continue to host annual camp meetings held the first week in August each year. The *History of Washington County, Tennessee (1988)* characterizes the Sulphur Springs community of north Washington County as *"most well known locally and nationally as the site of the historic annual Sulphur Springs Camp Meeting."* The annual camp meetings have hosted some of the greatest evangelists in American Methodism. Used for weddings, dramas and other services, the shed still serves the needs of the community's and region's people.