

One more revival?

Giant auditorium at Lancaster Camp Ground learns fate today
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LANCASTER, Ohio — People used to come to the Lancaster Camp Ground to be saved. Now, it's the white clapboard Davis Auditorium on the old Methodist-run revival site that needs saving. The fate of the immense barn of a building constructed in 1895 and named to honor music evangelists Curt and Charlotte Davis will be decided today. That's when the private association that now runs the campground plans to convene and vote on whether to preserve the building. No one wants to demolish it, but preserving it will cost about \$500,000. The auditorium is perched on a hill set back from W. Fair Avenue, surrounded by 240 cottages and steeped in the history of the American religious revival movement.

The Lancaster Camp Ground traces its origins to 1872. That is when a Methodist camp meeting tradition started, dedicated to open-air preaching and evangelism. The first camps in Logan in Hocking County and Carroll in Fairfield County were flooded, though, so the permanent camp moved to the Lancaster hilltop, about 30 miles southeast of Columbus.

So began the Lancaster Methodist Camp Ground in 1878. People then came in the summer, pitched little white tents and settled in for religious revivals. Over the years, the tents gave way to summer cottages. Amenities, including a hotel, grocery store and swimming pool, opened. At one time, Camp Ground, Ohio, as the community was known, had its own post office.

Most of the cottages are now permanent homes for residents of the little enclave, whose entire 62 acres are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The community is unique, a combination of historic relic and modern neighborhood.

"It's both," said the Rev. Earl Bishop, a 79-year-old Methodist minister who lives in a remodeled 1881 cottage. Bishop is among the leaders of the Lancaster Camp Meeting and Church Assembly Association Inc., which owns and operates the campground.

Until last fall, the association still was holding Sunday services at Davis Auditorium, featuring a different preacher each week. Fairfield County Sheriff Dave Phalen, who is not an ordained minister but is a committed Christian, has taken the pulpit here. So has Bishop.

"My wife said the best preaching of the season was Dave Phalen," Bishop said, chuckling.

In its heyday, the venue drew thousands to see nationally recognized speakers, including evangelist Billy Sunday and William Jennings Bryan, three time presidential candidate and crusader against evolutionary theory.

Now the building is deteriorating. The wood trusses that help support it are bowed, and it has other problems.

"It's an interesting building, and I would hate to see them take it down," said Don Cordle, the campground's maintenance supervisor, who regretfully removed all 267 Elmwood pews and put them in storage in the fall.

The cavernous building that once drew a crowd of about 15,000 inside and outside to hear the preachers sits empty, its stage still bearing an inscription from a psalm, "Be Still and Know That I Am God," and a cross.

Bishop is not daunted and is confident that money will be found to preserve the landmark. The association has established an account at the Fairfield County Foundation for donations.

"We have an awesome task before us, but we also know that we have an awesome God," he said.

