

WESLEY PINES
CONFERENCE, RETREAT
AND CAMPING CENTER

The Completion
of the
Original Camp
and the
Durr Wise Retreat Center

Gene Horton
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INTRODUCTION

Although Camp Wesley Pines is beginning its sixty-first year of ministry, very little has been written about its history. This work is an attempt to partially rectify that oversight by recounting two foundational events in the life of the camp. They are the creation of the original camp (1953-1961) and the Durr Wise Retreat Center (1984-1992).

Both accounts are organized into two parts:

- A narrative in the main text that tells the whole story through a blend of dates, facts, interviews, articles and other sources.
- A chronology in the appendix of dates and facts based on Mississippi Annual Conference Journals.

The two construction projects shared similar challenges despite the fact they were a quarter of a century apart. Money—or the lack there of—was a constant problem; and the time required to finish was much longer than expected. But through the provision of God and the perseverance of faithful leaders and contributors, we now enjoy a rustic camp and a retreat center.

The sources for all information presented herein are listed in the appendix. The last article in the appendix is this writer's reflection on how Camp Wesley Pines was built and continues to offer ministry: "Many People Working and Giving Together."

The camp's official title is Camp Wesley Pines Conference, Retreat and Camping Center, but most people call it Camp Wesley Pines. Except for the title page, the shorter name is used throughout this study.

We are grateful that over the last six decades Camp Wesley Pines has introduced tens of thousands to Christian camping. The spiritual heritages of many people, including this writer and his family, have been enriched by their experiences at the camp.

ORIGINAL CAMP: HOW A DREAM BECAME A REALITY

Funding Trials and Successes

In 1953 the Conference Youth Camp Committee was created and charged with building a permanent youth camp and raising necessary funding. The committee began searching for a site and organizing a financial appeal. Unfortunately, the “Million for Millsaps Campaign” overshadowed their efforts. By 1955 the committee had inspected a number of purchasable properties; but inadequate financial resources convinced them to look for a gift of land. Thus, they could save money, generate enthusiasm, and provide collateral for a construction loan.

Led by Durr Wise of Hazlehurst, a small group of Covich County Methodist laity stepped forward in the summer of 1956. They offered two options in Covich County for the consideration of the committee. For unknown reasons, neither was selected.

Later, a third choice became available on Lake Covich, a private fishing lake under development at the time. On June 7, 1958, the current location of Camp Wesley Pines was purchased through a principal contribution by Durr Wise and perhaps others. Now that the committee had land, they initiated another conference wide campaign to raise \$100,000 but made little progress.

In 1959 the organization of a Property Management Committee and the appointment of Rev. Roger Cameron as superintendent provided direction and momentum. Throughout 1960 contributions increased. The conference provided \$37,000 in apportionment payments, and a Special Session held at the tabernacle in October authorized a \$125,000 construction loan. With financing in hand, efforts focused on completing the job. A building contractor started in December and on May 5, 1961, the camp hosted its first overnight event—the annual Methodist Youth Conference with 149 attending. During the first summer, 1000 youth were expected to attend.

Board of Evangelism’s Evangelistic Youth Camps

The Board of Evangelism sponsored eight Evangelistic Youth Camps in the

summers of 1956 through 1959—all at state parks. (There may have been more, but they are not recorded in the journals.) After Camp Wesley Pines was completed in the spring of 1961, the board stopped using state parks.

The positive experiences youth enjoyed at the state park camps stimulated interest and support for the construction of a permanent facility. In an interview, Anna Coates, who attended a state park camp, remembered the upgrade in accommodations at Wesley Pines and especially the indoor plumbing.

Conference Youth Camp Committee

Charged with building and funding a permanent camp, this committee had a daunting task. As described above, they struggled at times and were always searching for financial support.

In the first eight years, at least 24 laity and clergy served on the committee while two chairpersons gave guidance: Rev. T.O. Prewitt (1953-1959) and Rev. R.I. Moore (1959-1961).

Property Management Committee

Led by Durr Wise, this group was charged with the development of the property during the crucial years of 1959 to 1961. They did a great job of coordinating the work of volunteers and professional contractors. Members of the committee were: J.D. Wise (chairperson), R.I. Moore, Sr., R.C. Stockett, Dan Breland and J. R. Camerson (superintendent).

Key Leaders

Dozens of leaders contributed their time, talents, and treasures to the dream of a conference youth camp. Space does not allow for all of them to be recognized, even if we knew their names. Below are the stories of a special few who played pivotal roles in building the camp.

J. Durr Wise, Sr. (1899-1987) and Robert V. Wise (1901-2001)

Durr was a Hazlehurst businessman who owned and operated, along with his

brother Robert, the Wise Motor Company Ford Dealership. In 1961 they sold out to J. Durr Wise, Jr., and both continued other business pursuits. Durr was an early investor in the commercial poultry business, and Robert was an officer at the Merchants and Planters Bank.

Durr made a principal donation in 1958, probably joined by his brother, Robert, and perhaps others, that enabled the original 50 acres to be purchased fee simple. Although Robert never formally served on committees before the camp was completed, he was interested in the progress. In an interview, Roger Cameron, Jr., son of Rev. Cameron, remembered that Robert was often present with Durr when he visited the camp.

In addition to his monetary gifts, Durr gave important administrative leadership though his membership on the following committees:

- Conference Youth Camp Committee
- Chairperson of the Board of Trustees whose name appears on the 1958 deed
- Chairperson of the Property Management Committee

Durr and Robert were life-long members of Hazlehurst United Methodist Church. Both were well known for their community leadership and philanthropy.

Roger Cameron (1919-1990) and Rosemary Cameron (1920-2001)

Raised in Shubuta, Roger graduated from Meridian High School and Lambuth College in Jackson, Tennessee. Rosemary was raised in Paris, Tennessee and attended Lambuth College. They met on campus and married January 4, 1942. Their marriage was blessed with two sons, Roger and Robert, who both spent part of their adolescent years at Camp Wesley Pines.

Roger joined the Mississippi Conference in 1943. Among the pastorates the Camerons served together were: Vimville (Meridian), Desoto (Quitman), Leakesville, Antioch-Justice Heights (Laurel), Glendale-Edwards Street (Hattiesburg), Pisgah (McComb), Utica-Carpenter-Cayuga-Bear Creek, Raleigh,

Gallman, Camp Wesley Pines and Beauregard.

Roger possessed a deep love and commitment for Christian camping. He was a leader in early district and conference youth ministries including the Board of Evangelism's Evangelistic Youth Camps, where Rosemary and he often led crafts. His service on the Conference Youth Camp Committee began in 1957.

Roger and Rosemary operated as a team. They provided crucial leadership during the camp's formative years and built a solid foundation for the future. Their appointment at Camp Wesley Pines spanned 24 years of faithful service—1957 to 1981.

DURR WISE RETREAT CENTER: HOW A DREAM BECAME A REALITY

Turning Point: 1984

1984 was a turning point in the life of Camp Wesley Pines. It was evolving from a summertime youth camp to a year round facility serving people of all ages. Yet, some guests expressed a preference for more comfortable accommodations than the rustic camp could offer.

In an effort to meet new demands, planning began for a retreat center with these strategies:

- Develop a road to the proposed site across the south end of Lake Copiah
- Construct a “blacked in” facility under direction of a building supervisor
- Utilize donated skilled labor and volunteers to save on costs

Within a year the new site was officially named the “Durr Wise Memorial Retreat Center” in recognition of the Hazlehurst businessman’s key role in the financing and construction of the original camp.

Also, a decision was made to add a recreational vehicle park to attract additional guests.

New Challenges: 1984-1986

The next few years presented challenges that impeded progress. First and foremost, money was always an issue. A conference-wide capital appeal raised insufficient funds even with the addition of a \$100,000 construction loan.

Another problem was the condition of the rustic camp. A quarter century of heavy usage was taking a toll. Many repairs were needed, and long-term assets—such as roofs and equipment—required replacement. These repairs and replacements had to be done regardless of the plans for the retreat center.

An emergency came in the fall of 1986 when a fire heavily damaged the administration building. Insurance helped with the cost of restoration, and the staff did most of the work; but the response demanded time and energy.

Construction Begins: 1987-1989

Despite the setbacks identified above, the recreational vehicle park was finished in 1986 and construction on the retreat center began in February 1987.

For the next two years, work continued with the help of contractors, donated skilled labor, and volunteers. By June 1989, enough of the retreat center was finished to be functional and it opened to guests while work continued on incomplete sections. But there was much left to be done!

Finishing Up: 1989-1992

At the 1990 annual conference, one year after the retreat center opened, the board of trustees summarized the situation in their annual report. All available funds (including a \$100,000 loan) had been spent; extra costs for insurance, utilities, upkeep and a monthly loan service had to be paid. The board appealed to the conference to utilize the retreat center, pointing out that many church groups were meeting at private venues when the camp could accommodate them.

By 1991 the number of guests was increasing and some improvements were being made, but progress remained slow due to financial limitations.

In April 1991 Rev. Rodney Smith was appointed the third executive director. In an interview, Rev. Smith summed up the retreat center's condition when he arrived:

- Two bedroom wings were being used but still required improvements
- One bedroom wing was not ready for occupation
- The great room was near completion
- The dining hall was completed and fully functional

Under new leadership, improvements continued through the labors of contractors, volunteers, and staff and the contributions of many benefactors for purchase of

supplies and materials.

In late 1992 all work was finished. After nine years of collaboration and giving, the retreat center was completed and ready for full service in 1993 and beyond!

Key Leaders

As with the original camp, many people contributed to the nine year endeavor to make the retreat center a reality. The construction plan called for the use of volunteer and donated labor whenever possible and required steadfast fundraising for every phase. Two United Methodist pastors provided exceptional vision, energy, and leadership throughout the whole process—Jack Loflin and Bill Lowry.

Jack M. Loflin (1934-2017)

Raised in Star, Jack graduated from Florence High School and Millsaps College. In 1959 he received his Master of Divinity from Vanderbilt University and returned to the Mississippi Conference. His local church appointments were Bude, First Columbia, Broadmeadow (Jackson) and Central (Meridian). He served many “connectional” posts including Conference Youth Director, Board of Education Executive Secretary, Brookhaven District Superintendent, and Conference Council on Ministries Chairperson.

Jack loved Camp Wesley Pines and all forms of Christian camping and outdoor ministries. In an interview, Bill Lowry remembers his fundraising efforts: “When I was chairperson, he would invite me to go with him to talk to potential supporters. We made lots of visits together.” This writer recalls serving on volunteer teams led by Jack to work on the conference center. His dedication to Camp Wesley Pines is summed up well in this statement from his conference journal memoir: “Over the years, he was a leader and advocate for Camp Wesley Pines, spearheading the drive to build Durr Wise Center and giving many hours of manual labor for that cause.”

W. T. “Bill” Lowry

Bill was raised in Meridian and graduated from Meridian High School and the University of Southern Mississippi. In 1955 he received his Master of Divinity Degree from Candler School of Theology, Emory University and returned to the

Mississippi Conference. Since his retirement in 1993, Bill has been living at Lake Junaluska, NC. On June 4, 2020, he celebrated his 90th birthday.

His local church appointments included Canton First Associate, Lovely Lane (Natchez), Pearl, Quitman, Hazlehurst, West Park (Jackson), Forest, Hawkins (Vicksburg), Centenary (McComb), and Popular Springs Drive (Meridian).

Bill served as Chairperson of the Camp Wesley Pines Board of Trustees 1984-1989. He provided key leadership during the planning and building phases of the retreat center and the refurbishment of the original camp. When his tenure ended the retreat center was largely completed, and the original camp was in much better condition.

APPENDIX

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE ORIGINAL CAMP Reports of Youth Camp Committee and Board of Evangelism

Mississippi Annual Conference Journals 1953-1961

(Annual conference reports generally describe activities during the preceding conference year rather than the calendar year. For example, reports for 1954 cover the last half of 1953 and the first half of 1954.)

1953

The Mississippi Conference established a Youth Camp Committee for the purpose of building a camp and raising financial support.

1954

Throughout the conference year, the Youth Camp Committee searched for a suitable site and visited existing camps. No progress was made on fundraising because the capital campaign for Millsaps College over shadowed their efforts.

1955

Some opportunities to buy land were considered by the Youth Camp Committee, but with no funds available they decided to seek donated land. As annual conference closed, an opportunity was developing in Copiah County with “J. Durr Wise and Associates.”

1956

“J. Durr Wise and Associates” offered to provide the money for one of two tracts of land located in Copiah County. A Board of Trustees was formed to receive property with the following members: J.M. Ewing, B.M. Stevens, T.J. Luke, W.D. Myres, J.K. Milner, J.J. Nossier, and J. Durr Wise. (Wise and Nossier lived in Copiah County.)

The Board of Evangelism scheduled two Evangelistic Youth Camps at state parks in July: (1) Hattiesburg, Seashore and Brookhaven Districts at Lake Shelby State Park (now Paul B. Johnson) near Hattiesburg; and (2) Meridian, Jackson and Vicksburg Districts at Leroy Percy State Park near Hollandale.

1957

For reasons not disclosed in the records, the Youth Camp Committee did not acquire either of the Copiah County choices offered in 1956.

During 1957 “J. Durr Wise and Associates” offered for consideration a third site located on a private fishing lake named “Lake Copiah” that was being developed at the time.

The Board of Evangelism scheduled two Evangelistic Youth Camps in July at Lake Shelby and Leroy Percy State Parks.

George Lumsden replaced J.M. Ewing on the Board of Trustees.

A request was made for \$10,000 from the World Service Commission.

1958

On June 7, 1958, the Trustees of the Conference Youth Camp purchased from the Copiah Development Cooperation approximately 50 acres of land located on Lake Copiah. Trustees named in the deed were J. D. Wise (Hazlehurst), George Lumsden (Brookhaven), B. M. Stevens (Richton), T. J. Luke (Jackson), J. K. Milner (Gulfport), W.D. Myers (Philadelphia), and J. J. Nossler (Hazlehurst).

Approval was given for a land swap with the Long family of two eight-acre tracts with no money involved in the exchange.

A Conference wide campaign to raise \$100,000 for camp construction was announced.

The Board of Evangelism scheduled two Evangelistic Youth Camps in July at Lake Shelby State Park for all six districts. (Evidently, Leroy Percy was not used.)

1959

Various efforts to organize fundraising continued with little success. Other actions included forming:

- A personnel committee to secure a camp director with the understanding that the director would be appointed to the Gallman Charge while overseeing construction and that the camp would pay a portion of salaries and expenses.
- A property management committee to oversee construction composed of R.I. Moore, Sr., J. D. Wise, R.C. Stockett, Dan Breland and J. R. Cameron.

A brochure was developed for promotional purposes.

J. Roger Cameron was appointed as pastor of Gallman Charge and Youth Camp Director for the new conference year.

1960

Durr Wise became chairman of both the Board of Trustees and the Property Management Committee.

A gravel road was completed with dirt work done for free and gravel provided at a special consideration.

Construction began on three buildings. The tabernacle was completed in the summer of 1960, but there are no records on the progress of the other two buildings.

Other improvements included:

- An atheletic field
- A water well and storage tank
- Installation of power lines
- Street lights that were donated
- Gift of four picnic tables by Hazlehurst Vocational Class
- A pavilion and two classrooms, one of which was donated by the Vicksburg District MYF
- 30 acres of underbrush cleared by volunteers and day laborers
- Beach clean up and sanding
- Acquisition of a truck, tractor, and tools

A Special Session of the Mississippi Annual Conference met at Camp WesleyPine's tabernacle on October 12, 1960 and authorized up to \$125,000 of indebtedness for the purpose of finishing the camp. (\$125,000 in 1960 has the spending power of about \$1,000,000 in 2020.)

Two Board of Evangelism's Evangelistic Youth Camps were held in July at Lake Shelby State Park. (Evidently, Leroy Percy State Park was not used.)

Various adult, youth and children's groups visited the camp for picnics, day camps, and vacation Bible schools.

A total of nearly 600 youth cleaned underbrush at two workdays.

In addition to private gifts, no less than \$37,000 of apportionment payments were made by the conference. (\$37,000 in 1960 has the spending power of \$324,000 in 2020.)

The conference authorized the sell or trade of 8 acres of land given by the Gabriel family in 1958 that did not adjoin camp property.

1961

Improvements continued through the fall of 1960 and the winter of 1961. A contractor completed all planned buildings between December and April. Structures ready for occupancy were the tabernacle (1960), two classroom shelters, four dormitories, administration building, dining hall/kitchen, and superintendent's home.

No records survived on the total construction cost, but an article in *The Meteor*, dated March 2, 1961, quoted Roger Cameron as saying it was over \$200,000. (\$200,000 in 1961 has the spending power of about \$1,700,000 in 2020.)

The first overnight event was the Methodist Youth Conference May 5-6 with 149 in attendance.

Attendance the first year is unknown, but the same newspaper article noted above

stated that Roger Cameron expected over 1000 youth during the first season scheduled from June 17 to August 18.

CHRONOLOGY OF DURR WISE RETREAT CENTER

Mississippi Annual Conference Reports 1984-1992

(Annual conference reports generally describe activities during the preceding conference year rather than the calendar year. For example, reports for 1985 cover the last half of 1984 and the first half of 1985.)

1984 Bill Lowry, Chair

The board reported that a transitional time had arrived at the camp. After 23 years of operation, it was changing from a summertime youth venue to a year round facility serving people of all ages. Yet, some groups were looking for more than rustic accommodations.

A retreat center to meet these new demands was planned with these strategies:

- Develop a road to the proposed site across the south end of Lake Copiah
- Construct a “blacked-in” facility under direction of a building supervisor
- Utilize donated skilled labor and volunteers to save on costs

Also, heavy usage at the original camp necessitated improvements to the tabernacle and the sleeping cabins.

Finally, the addition of an RV site was planned to attract a different type of camper.

1985 Bill Lowry, Chair

Work continued on some buildings. The sleeping cabins were repaired and air conditioned, and the tabernacle was closed in and air conditioned.

The retreat center was named the “Durr Wise Memorial Retreat Center” in memory of J. Durr Wise’s key roll in the development of the original camp.

Appeals for financial help were made across the conference because of insufficient funds to complete the first stage of the retreat center.

1986 Bill Lowry, Chair

The conference authorized the camp to borrow up to \$100,000 for construction of

the retreat center.

Now that the road to the conference center was complete, construction on the building could begin shortly.

The RV site was completed adding a new way of serving campers.

In the fall, a fire destroyed the administration building including the canteen, infirmary, guest rooms and summer staff housing. Many records were lost, too.

1987 Bill Lowry, Chair

The Durr Wise Center construction began in February.

1988 Bill Lowry, Chair

The Durr Wise Center construction continued. The exterior was completed and work continued on the interior.

1989 Bill Lowry, Chair

The Durr Wise Center opened but portions of the interior were incomplete.

1990 Riley Burton, Chair

No progress was made on the retreat center and bookings were below expectations.

The board struggled with financial obligations because:

- All funds available, including a \$100,000 loan, were spent to open the facility
- Extra costs for insurance, utilities and upkeep had to be paid
- A loan payment of \$1,335.42 was due monthly

The board appealed to the conference to use the retreat center pointing out that some groups were using private venues that could be accommodated by the camp.

Also, repairs and additions at “old camp” required more money.

1991 Fred Britton, Chair

Two years after the center opened, the number of guests began to increase which helped with cash flow.

The dining hall at the retreat center was finished and dedicated to Dr. J.W. Leggett, Jr.

Rev. Rodney Smith was installed as the third executive director in April.

In an interview with Rev. Smith, he summed up the center’s condition when he arrived:

- Two bedroom wings were being used but still required some work
- One bedroom wing was not ready for occupation
- The great room was near completion
- The dining hall was completed and fully functional

1992 Fred Britton, Chair

The Durr Wise Center was completed in late 1992 and ready for full usage in 1993.

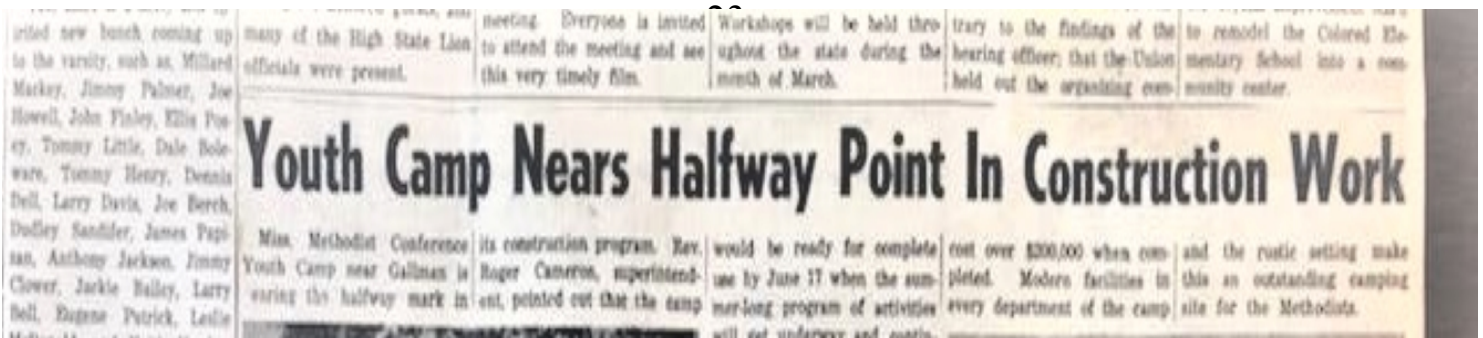
The Meteor March 2, 1961

Mississippi Methodist Youth Camp near Gallman is nearing the halfway mark in its construction. Rev. Roger Cameron, superintendent, pointed out that the camp would be ready for complete use by June 17, when the summer-long program of activities will get underway and continue through August 18. Over one thousand youth are expected to take advantage of the facilities on the shore of Lake Copiah.

The camp is composed at present of four dormitories (each one in a four-unit structure with rooms for bunks and modern bathroom facilities), four teaching shelters (eight of these will be needed) and a 500 seating capacity tabernacle. The superintendents home is nearly completed and the cafeteria (200 seating capacity) and administration building (office, canteen, infirmity and guest rooms) are in various stages of completion. A six thousand gallon water tank and a deep well are in use for the water supply. The system is equipped with six small fire plugs and they have some fire hoses. Natural gas, electricity, and a modern sewer system are installed. A large system for sewage disposal is complete.

All buildings are insulated and heated for year-round use. The lake shore has been cleared for swimming and a sand beach has been made.

Three-hundred twenty people can be accommodated at this modern camp- which will cost over \$200,000 when completed. Modern facilities in every department of the camp and the rustic setting make this an outstanding camping site for the Methodists.



**Special Session of Mississippi Annual Conference
Tabernacle at Camp Wesley Pines**

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SPECIAL SESSION OF THE

MISSISSIPPI ANNUAL CONFERENCE

October 12, 1960

Watching the World Series...

The special session was called by Bishop Marvin Franklin to authorize a construction loan to finish building the camp. The session approved up to \$125,000 of indebtedness.

Robert Cameron, son of Camp Superintendent Roger Cameron, was present at the special session held at the tabernacle. Robert remembers that Bishop Franklin was following the World Series on a small TV hidden behind the pulpit. During breaks the bishop and others would watch the game. It began at 2:00p.m. local time and was aired on the Jackson NBC affiliate WLBT.

Thanks to the folks listed below who shared their memories...

Robert Cameron, Hazlehurst, MS

Younger son of Roger and Rosemary Cameron who lived at Gallman or Camp Wesley Pines June 1959-1961.

Roger Camerson, Jr., Hattiesburg, MS

Elder son of Roger and Rosemary Cameron who lived at Gallman or Camp Wesley Pines June 1959-1961.

Anna Coates, Hazlehurst, MS

Member of Hazlehurst United Methodist Church who attended a Board of Evangelism's Evangelistic Youth Camp at Lake Shelby State Park and early youth camps at Camp Wesley Pines.

Rev. Bill Lowry, Lake Junaluska, NC

Chairperson of Camp Wesley Pines Board Trustees, 1984-1989.

He was a key leader in the planning and construction of the Durr Wise Retreat Center.

Rev. Rodney Smith, Moselle, MS

Executive Director of Camp Wesley Pines, 1991-1996.

During his tenure, the Durr Wise Center was completed in late 1992 and the first Walk To Emmaus was held August 18-21, 1994.

Jack and Mary Ann Yates, Hazlehurst, MS

Long-time members of Hazlehurst United Methodist Church who knew Durr and Robert Wise.

Official Journals and Yearbooks

1954-1961

Available online from J. B. Cain Archives of Mississippi Methodism, Millsaps College

1984-1993

Available online from Mississippi Conference Website

Acknowledgments

Although all mistakes and shortcomings are solely the responsibility of the writer, the people listed below provided invaluable assistance as noted.

Dr. Leslie Horton: Editorial Assistance

Rev. Bill Lowry: Historical Accuracy

Ms. Debra McIntosh, Archivist, J. B. Cain Library, Millsaps College: Access to Official Journals, 1954-1961

Ms. Tricia Nelson: Editorial Assistance

AND GIVING TOGETHER

The successful completion of Camp Wesley Pines illustrates how God often works. Many people helped convert 50 acres of woods into a beautiful camp ready to receive thousands of children, youth, and adults.

Consider the contributions—big and small—that made it all possible...

- Gifted leaders, both lay and clergy, who helped frame the vision and manage the work
- Volunteer workers—adults and youth—who gave a few hours or a day of work
- Skilled workers who donated or reduced the cost of their labor, equipment and materials
- Key gifts from a few financially blessed donors that enabled the purchase of a favorable site
- Apportionment payments—really gifts from every corner of the conference

All of these contributions working together lowered construction and financing costs, raised the margin of operating funds, and prepared the camp for a successful opening.

Deuteronomy 16:17

Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way God has blessed you.

2 Corinthians 9:8

And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others.

