

METHODIST ENCAMPMENT NEIGHBORHOOD
Texas Historical Commission Subject Marker – Kerrville, Texas

I. CONTEXT

The town of Kerrville was founded on the banks of the Guadalupe River as a shingle maker's camp. The Guadalupe flows from the northwest part of Kerr County 255 miles to the Gulf of Mexico.¹ In 1844 Joshua D. Brown was living in Gonzales, Texas when he became interested in a new industry, the making of cypress shingles. In 1846 he led a party of ten men up the Guadalupe to the site, where they remained for a few months until the Apache Indian presence in the area became troublesome and the new settlers were driven from the land. In 1848, Brown and his followers returned to stay. On January 26, 1856, Kerr County was formed from Bexar Land District Number 2. The act of incorporation that names the county Kerr also designated the name of the county seat as Kerrsville. Later the "s" was dropped and the town became Kerrville.²

Kerr County and Kerrville were named for Major James Kerr, who was born in Kentucky in 1790 and came to Texas with his family in 1825 as Surveyor-General for the DeWitt Colony on the Guadalupe River at the site he named Gonzales. Already in Kentucky and in Missouri he had been active in politics and law enforcement, at the same time practicing medicine.³ Joshua D. Brown's Aunt (Peggy) Margaret was Major James Kerr's sister. Both men served in Texas' struggle for independence against Mexico, with Major Kerr playing key roles in the Revolution and in the new Republic. Major James Kerr was a physician, surveyor, soldier, lawyer, politician, Texas Congressman, and Texas Ranger.⁴ He died in December of 1850, without ever having seen Kerr County and its county seat, which were named in his honor after his death.⁵

The San Antonio Aransas Pass Railroad arrived in Kerrville on October 6, 1887, making it the last stop on the train line. The S.A. &A.P. was a popular line that took people and trade "To The Mountain Resorts" and the "Finest Health Country in America." The rail served as an important piece of history, bringing prosperity to the area.⁶ Construction of new lumberyards, homes, businesses and many camps along the river helped form the community.

¹ Kerr County Historical Commission <http://www.co.kerr.tx.us/historical/>

² Kerr County Historical Commission <http://www.co.kerr.tx.us/historical/>

³ Wilkinson, Jan. "The First Settler of Kerr County, Texas, Joshua D. Brown, Founder and Father of Kerrville," paper and oral history for the Edwards Plateau Historical Association meeting and publication, June 11, 2018, on <http://www.blog.wilkinsonranch.com>.

⁴ *Biographical Encyclopedia of Texas*. New York: Southern Publishing Company, 1880 pages 272-273. in The Portal to Texas History, <http://www.texashistory.unt.edu>

⁵ Crain, James Kerr. *A Texas Family* <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/kerrcrain.htm>

⁶ San Antonio Aransas Pass Railroad Timetable, February 1904. Page 11

The Epworth League was a Methodist youth organization that started in Dallas, Texas in 1892. The purpose of the League was to develop young church members in their religious life and to provide Church training. The name Epworth came from the boyhood home in England of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement.⁷ Corpus Christi was the site for the statewide meeting of the Epworth League from 1906 until 1915, known as “Epworth-by-the-Sea.” It moved to Port O'Conner until 1919. A severe storm that year wrecked the property, which was then abandoned.

The leaders of West Texas Methodists wanted to have a new place for spiritual and intellectual training, as well as for social and recreational facilities for children, youth, and adults. This vision came to a climax in the fall of 1923, at the West Texas Annual Conference, when the following resolution was presented and adopted: "Resolution for the establishment of the West Texas Encampment Association under the direction and supervision of the West Texas Conference of the Methodist Church South." The first task of this Board was to find a suitable location for such an Encampment. A number of locations were offered throughout the conference, but Kerrville was considered by the Board as the most logical.⁸ In 1926, it was written “The trustees were fortunate beyond their fondest dreams in accepting this particular body of land. It fronts on the Guadalupe River, affording an ideal place for boating, swimming and fishing, and rises gradually to the back line more than a mile distant. ... The 200 acres with the improvements, private and public, are now conservatively valued at 100,000 dollars and could not be duplicated for that amount.”⁹

II. OVERVIEW

Methodist Encampment neighborhood is built next to the Mount Wesley Conference Center. It is now a community of approximately 100 homes originally built to provide housing for families attending the annual denominational encampment each year. The first season was 1924. The cottages were primarily for summer use, but today they are occupied year round.¹⁰ This is an early example of the summer camps that arose around Kerrville in the 1920s due to the scenic beauty and healthful climate of the area.

Camps were a vital economic driver of early Kerr County. Many of today's Kerrville residents attended summer camps here. Native American tribes were the first to “camp” along the Guadalupe River. Summer camping as we know it today began in 1921 when Herbert Crate opened Camp Rio Vista between Ingram and Hunt. Most campers came by train from Texas' largest cities. They then traveled unpaved roads following the Guadalupe

⁷ *Handbook of Texas Online*, Walter N. Vernon, "EPWORTH LEAGUE," accessed July 21, 2018, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ixe01>. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁸ Willmann, A. A., comp. *History of the Kerrville Methodist Assembly, 1924-1960*. Compiled by A. A. Willmann

⁹ “Where Methodist Kerrville Assembly Combines Religious Instruction With Recreation”. *San Antonio Express* Sunday Morning - July 11, 1926

¹⁰ “*Finding History in these Hills*,” Deborah Gaudier. “Methodist Encampment.” Accessed July 21, 2016. <http://kerrhistory.blogspot.com/2016/03/methodist-encampment.html>. Uploaded March 2, 2016.

River. Edward J. "Doc" Stewart, the head football and basketball coach at the University of Texas at Austin in the early 1920s, was responsible in 1924 for beginning three well-known Kerr County camps: Camp Stewart for Boys, Heart o' The Hills Camp for Girls, and Camp Mystic. "Doc" Stewart started another camp in 1926, Camp Stewart for Girls; a year later it became Camp Mystic for Girls. Another pioneer in Kerr county camping was Miss Ora Johnson, who founded Camp Waldemar in 1926. Today many camps can boast of multi-generational campers from the same family.¹¹ Mount Wesley was one of those early camps and is in use still today.

At a time when pastors lived in parsonages, housing provided by the local congregations, the Methodist Encampment neighborhood provided a place for Methodist preachers and their families to call their own. It was open not just to the preachers, but to any of the faithful and provided a retreat to where neighbors shared their faith and background. There are now no homeowners groups or restrictions as to ownership; however a spirit of community and looking out for each other still exists. Cottages built by contractors stand beside homeowner-built properties.

III. HISTORICAL/CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Historical documents indicate that the Kerrville Chamber of Commerce, Kerr County and the City of Kerrville raised funds to purchase the 200 acres of land extending from the banks of the Guadalupe River to the top of what is now called Mount Wesley.¹² This property is centrally located for the principal cities of the West Texas Conference of the Methodist Church, which include San Antonio, Austin, San Angelo, San Marcos and Corpus Christi.¹³ The West Texas Encampment Association filed the deeds on record. The first 160 acres were purchased from Malta and M. R. Porter on February 29, 1924 for \$10,500 and another 40 acres from Alice and J. J. Starkey on March 1, 1924 for \$1,000.¹⁴ Immediately after the purchase the Board, under the leadership of Secretary-Treasurer W. H. Chambers, started to lay out the land into streets and lots. Very quickly, on April 1, 1924, an all-day barbecue and lot sale was held. Between 500 and 600 people attended, and 91 of the 130 lots were sold for \$150 per lot.¹⁵ This money was used to improve the grounds, as this hill was nothing but a wilderness without roads or houses.¹⁶ W. R. Perkins (Representative to the Texas State Legislature in 1910, Jim Wells County Judge and President of First United Methodist Church of Alice, Texas¹⁷) was the first listed purchaser of land.¹⁸ The following Monday J. M. Calhoun of San Antonio began work on the first Cottage, a frame building to be finished in cobble stones.¹⁹ There were two roads from the Old Spanish Trail (Junction

¹¹ Joe Herring blog July 17, 2013 "*A Brief History of Summer Camps in Kerr County*"

¹² "*History of the Kerrville Methodist Assembly*" 1924-1960 Compiled by A. A. Willmann

¹³ "Where Methodist Kerrville Assembly Combines Religious Instruction With Recreation". *San Antonio Express* Sunday Morning - July 11, 1926.

¹⁴ Kerr County Deeds Volume 1 pages 34, 35, 29 & 30.

¹⁵ *Kerrville Mountain Sun* April 3, 1924.

¹⁶ Willmann, A. A., comp.

¹⁷ *Texas Bar Journal*. September 22, 1964 Vol. 27 No.8 Pages 701,702,759 & 760

¹⁸ *Kerrville Mountain Sun* April 10, 1924.

¹⁹ *Kerrville Mountain Sun* April 10, 1924.

Highway) to the top of the mountain. W.H. King was hired to construct the cafeteria for the camp--the first community building. The auditorium and commissary soon followed.²⁰ Next, work was started on a water system, electric lights, telephone, cafeteria, and a number of tents, all in preparation of the program in July, with two hundred delegates attending the six-day conference. In 2004, Laretta King remembers the property: "My father, a Methodist minister, decided to go and help. The workers brought their own tools, axes, saws, rakes, etc. to work with and stayed in tents. It was all hand labor; no bull dozers or other machines."²¹

Many attractive cottages have been built. Some homes were given names associated with the owners, such as James Perry of San Antonio - "Perry-Winkle", W. R. Perkins of Alice - "Perk Inn", Elsie Peace - "House of Peace", J. F. Duke of Forney - "The Duchess". Others depicted the environment such as David T. Peel of Corpus Christi - "Restholme", Rev. H. E. Draper of San Angelo - "Loma Vista." Even the cafeteria had a name, "Eatmor!" On June 3, 1926, the *Hill View Times* reported on two new cottages. One was owned by Mrs. M. E. Moore of San Angelo. "It is a beautiful building with cobblestone front and cobblestone columns. The grounds have been beautifully laid out, terraced, and flower gardens planted." The other was a "fine new 5-room house for Mrs. Phoebe Storms. [A] beauty in every respect, with front porch and sleeping porch." The builder for both was Moore & Saner, who was the contractor for most of the early encampment buildings.²² Mrs. Maggie Moore was a lifelong supporter of Mt. Wesley. The Moore auditorium, built in 1939, was named in her honor.

The neighborhood has had many interesting residents. One of them, Ella (Byler) Dobie, was a teacher and mother of six; her eldest was J. Frank Dobie. He was a teacher, storyteller, folklorist, historian and one of Texas' most iconic writers. He would visit Kerrville often and did much of his writing during the winters at his mother's cottage.²³ While visiting in September of 1942, he said the purpose was to "rest up and do considerable work while resting."²⁴

Neighbor Dawn Shaw, was just 13 years old in 1942 when she moved to Methodist Encampment with her mother. Her father, Sherman Davis, a Chaplain in the Army, was sent to Egypt.²⁵ She lived in that same home over 78 years. Her husband, David Shaw, was President of a Mt. Wesley Neighborhood Association. For many years he maintained a neighborhood directory and edited a neighborhood newsletter.

The group who founded both Mount Wesley and the Methodist Encampment neighborhood adjoining it, believed in the spiritual value of their efforts. "Because we have something greater than oil wells, or any other

²⁰ *Kerrville Mountain Sun* April 10, 1924.

²¹ Kerrville First United Methodist Church, "*Our Birthday Book, Kerrville First United Methodist Church 1854-2004*, page73.

²² Gaudier

²³ *Kerrville Mountain Sun*, July 15, 1937.

²⁴ *Kerrville Mountain Sun*, September 10, 1942.

²⁵ "*Our Birthday Book*" Kerrville First United Methodist Church 1854-2004, page121

material possession. These improvements were not made for material gains but to expand and improve the spiritual growth of the church. That is what made Mount Wesley great. Ever since the first Assembly in 1924, people have come here for study, guidance and inspiration. They received the Holy Spirit if they sought for it earnestly.”²⁶ In 1987 Bishop Ernest Dixon, Jr. wrote, “Mt Wesley Conference Center is a place loved dearly by many persons on their Christian pilgrimage. For some it is a shrine to... gain wisdom and courage for living and serving in today’s world.”²⁷ At that time many preachers spent years traveling to wherever the church led them. Families were not able to set roots in a particular area. This neighborhood was the place they called home and many homes are still owned by descendants of the original owners. Several streets were named for the Texas towns where the original owners were from, such as Alice, McAllen and Uvalde. Over the years some homes and cottages have been torn down and new ones built, but the majority have been maintained and improved. Its history and distinctive architecture help give the neighborhood a unique atmosphere. The hillsides, threaded with paths made by whitetail deer and grey fox, attract an abundance of walkers from all over.

Marking this community with a Texas Historical Subject Marker will aid in its further preservation. Already the submission process has excited some neighbors to trace their individual homes’ history, some of whom plan to apply for individual markers. Walking through, you see not only the two crosses at the top of the hill but also that every home is unique - some elegant, some quirky. Most have been added on through the years but maintain individual characteristics. Some have totem poles and sculptures out front, and most have porches or outdoor gardens where knowing your neighbor by name is the standard, not the exception. This community, built as a spiritual retreat, holds a unique place in the historic significance of Kerrville and in its future development.

²⁶ “*History of the Kerrville Methodist Assembly*” 1924-1960 Compiled by A. A. Willmann

²⁷ “Completing the Mt. Wesley Plan” letter from the United Methodist Church 1987 to the Southwest and Rio Grande Conferences