

Camp meeting calling

Exhibit showcases a spiritual rite of summer for African-Americans

By Amanda Chan

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Posted: Friday, Jul. 23, 2010

Up the winding staircase, on the second floor of the Charlotte Museum of History, is a hallway to African-American spiritual revival.

A new exhibit, "This Far By Faith: Carolina Camp Meetings, an African-American Tradition," opens today to the public through Oct. 3. It's a collection of more than 40 black-and-white photographs taken at African-American camp meetings around the Carolinas since 2001, including a camp in Lincolnton.

The meetings, which became hugely popular in the early to mid-1800s, were part of what is known as the Second Great Awakening, said UNC Chapel Hill history professor Bill Ferris. They were usually held during harvest time, from July to October, and attendees would camp for days in tents, listen to preachers and meet with friends who traveled from other towns and cities.

"It was a way of bringing a religious experience to the frontier, and during that period, the American South was considered the frontier," Ferris said.

Minuette Floyd, an associate professor of art at the University of South Carolina, took the photographs for the exhibit. She grew up attending camp meetings with her family. She returned to them as an adult in 1996 and has been going ever since.

"Nothing had changed in the way the tents are structured, (with) the tabernacle as the central structure on the campgrounds," Floyd said, referring to the place where the preacher gives the sermon.

Floyd photographed seven camp meeting locations and took video footage that plays on two TVs in the exhibit.

"It's a story that needs to be captured," she said.

At the exhibit, a red wall is a backdrop for photographs of children jumping rope, adults singing, people preaching, and the life of people who stayed in the tent communities.

Floyd documented the meetings through grants from the National Endowment of the Arts, the South Carolina Arts Commission and the South Carolina Humanities Council.

The national traveling exhibit originated at the McKissick Museum at USC in 2008. The Charlotte Museum of History wanted to bring the photographs to Charlotte because almost everyone can relate to community gatherings, exhibits manager Lee Goodan said.

"People can identify with the sense of community," Goodan said. "It's not even just African-Americans, because other people have gatherings that they go to, too."

If you go:

WHAT: "This Far By Faith: Carolina Camp Meetings, an African-American Tradition."

WHERE: Charlotte Museum of History, 3500 Shamrock Drive.

WHEN: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 1-5 p.m. Sunday, closed Mondays.

DETAILS: \$6 adults, \$3 children 6 to 12, free 6 and younger. Exhibit admission included in price. 704-568-1774.