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SETTING THE STAGE

"Enter into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise," declares the main entrance to Ocean Grove, New Jersey. Although these gates no longer guard against the intrusion of undesirables or Sunday vehicular traffic, even at the turn of the twenty-first century, one cannot enter Ocean Grove without crossing boundaries, exiting one world, entering another, and stepping onto holy ground.

In July 1869, twenty people made the first pilgrimage to this overgrown, uninhabited patch of land. Before they left, they consecrated the sand dunes and shrub brush as sacred ground, a site for the faithful to come generation after generation to seek holiness. It may seem odd to an early-twenty-first-century reader to equate a place on the Jersey shore with the Holy Land; but for these twenty people, and for the hundreds of thousands who followed them, a stay in Ocean Grove was indeed a visit to the Holy. A summer lived in community with fellow pilgrims was time out of time—a sacred, festival time—when the routines of everyday life were put aside for the pursuit of perfection.

Ocean Grove and its people moved toward perfection by performing it. Within a carefully crafted architecture of holiness, a community of men and women created an intertwined system of models through which they made perfection both visible and a real possibility in present reality. Modeling perfection was a means of acting perfect while becoming perfect. The models presented officially sanctioned norms of holiness in ways that were

Figure 2. A communion service in the Great Auditorium. Reprinted from souvenir postcard, mid-twentieth century.

comprehensible. The models were not, however, static. They became ritual objects and actions—"means of grace," in Methodist terms—that helped produce the state being modeled. The performances of holiness created by the leaders of the community and facilitated by this unique performance space allowed large numbers of guests to model perfection together.

Ocean Grove was the longest-lived ecclesiarchy in American history. From its founding in 1869 until 1979, it operated under a charter that granted the Methodists of the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association municipal powers to create a utopian village that offered safe haven from the demands of the city. In its heyday, tens of thousands lived through the summer in a tent-and-cottage community carefully secluded and protected from the everyday world. Ocean Grove was a place where the rules of the everyday no longer applied. Yet unlike other nineteenth-century seaside resorts such as Atlantic City and Coney Island, noted for their air of carnival-like abandon, the rules at Ocean Grove were comparatively prohibitive. You could not drink. You could not smoke. You could not play cards. You could not drive your car on Sunday. You could, however, do several things that would have scandalized pious Methodists of an earlier era. You could, for example, enjoy the beach, take the summer off, sell tickets to popular amusements, and stage comic gender satire with cross-dressed men. But only if these things led you closer to the goal of perfection in holiness. The social architects of Ocean

Grove intended that every activity of the day and night would aid in the pursuit of holiness. Even recreation was an essential means of grace for the industrial-age urban worker. The model citizen in the model city did not have to spend every ounce of strength pursuing a secular occupation; instead, he or she had time to enjoy the fruits of God's creation and seek spiritual renewal. For a century and a quarter, residents of this community have performed this model of holiness by praying *and* playing together. Ocean Grove is Jerusalem-by-the-sea—a Holy City set apart from the quotidian—dedicated to perfection through holy leisure.

Ocean Grove was founded by members of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness. Today, two centuries after the explosive growth of camp meetings in America, thousands still make their pilgrimage to Ocean Grove every summer for a week-long camp-meeting revival by the sea. Camp meeting, the ubiquitous religious and social gathering ground of nineteenth-century frontier America, may sound like an anachronism as America begins the twenty-first century, when the frontier refers to other planets, quantum computing, and biotechnology. Yet throughout America, camp meetings remain an enduring phenomenon. Kenneth Brown has been able to document more than 120 active camp meetings founded in 1876 or earlier.[1] These contemporary camp meetings might appear to be historical dramas that replay and reassert nineteenth-century spirituality and culture in the light of American postmodernity. But for many participants, they remain an essential ritual of summer—a means of defining self and community.

Historians of religion have often marked the golden age of camp meetings as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Charles Johnson's classic work is typical of the popular thesis on their origin and decline. In his analysis, Presbyterian minister James McGready virtually invented camp meetings in Kentucky at the turn of the nineteenth century with his huge gatherings at Cane Ridge. "The origins of the camp meeting, which seemed to have appeared on the American frontier full blown in 1800 as the most striking manifestation of the Great Revival, have long been hid in obscurity. . . . One day the frontier was a godless place . . . and the next it was all aflame with religious zeal."[2] Johnson goes on to chart the tremendous success Methodists had in adopting the camp meeting as their own and using it to propagate their denomination throughout the trans-Allegheny West. But, he concludes, "The backwoods revival was apparently over by the 1840s. The once-great institution had reached the final stage of gradual but inevitable decline."[3] He attributes this decline to the changing demographics of America, with its improved transportation and refined social life, the overorganization

of the institution in the thirties and forties by well-meaning Methodist leaders, the increasing emphasis on respectability, and the rise of alternative evangelistic tools like the protracted indoor meeting. Nowhere is this decline more evident for Johnson than in the publication of camp-meeting manuals in the 1840s and 1850s. Publishing only in the east, "their preacher-authors constituted a rear-guard action, a conservative phalanx battling to preserve the old. They insisted upon the continuance of the institution for its own sake."[4] In Johnson's view, permanent camp meetings like Ocean Grove were essentially resort communities that used the camp-meeting formula to great "commercial," if not religious, success.

Kenneth Brown challenges the notion that camp meetings flourished for only three or four decades on the frontier.[5] He argues that the prevalence of outdoor religious events in America from the mid-eighteenth century on means that the camp meeting could not have erupted *ex nihilo* in the fully developed form of the Kentucky revivals. The founders of Methodism, John Wesley and George Whitefield, themselves pioneered the use of outdoor spaces for preaching and sacramental services.[6] Other denominations held services outdoors when church buildings were either inadequate or nonexistent. Further, Brown documents that, by 1794, a half-dozen years before Cane Ridge, these various outdoor services and meetings had evolved into genuine camp meetings at Grassy Bank and Denver, North Carolina.

Russell Richey argues in a similar vein that the Methodist practice of quarterly meetings provided a performance model that easily evolved into camp meetings. In these outdoor meetings, which preceeded what we know as camp meetings, Methodists from many parishes gathered members from throughout the region both to conduct the church's business and to stoke the fires of revival.[7] Richey states that "some of the camp meeting's power to create frontier community derived from its ritual reenactment of earlier Methodist community. It was a new way of reliving the old and an old way for living in the new."[8] After 1801, Methodists continued to gather by region, but the business portion of their gatherings was separated from the religious and was done at "conference." The religious element of these gatherings became camp meetings. The new mode of meeting "worked" for Methodists as for no other denomination precisely because it was not new but was rooted in familiar performance.

This new research on the origin of camp meetings highlights the important connection between Methodism and the genre of performance known paradigmatically in the frontier camp meeting. These scholars have shown that this performance idiom recurs consistently throughout the history of Methodism and is not confined to a singular expression of camp meeting