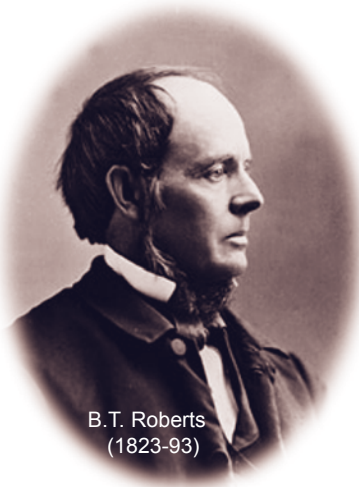


FREE METHODIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

SUMMER/FALL 2009 — Volume 10, No. 1



B. T. Roberts
(1823-93)

Published by the
**Marston Memorial
Historical Center**
ISSN 1546-4199

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A Curious Camp Meeting Report

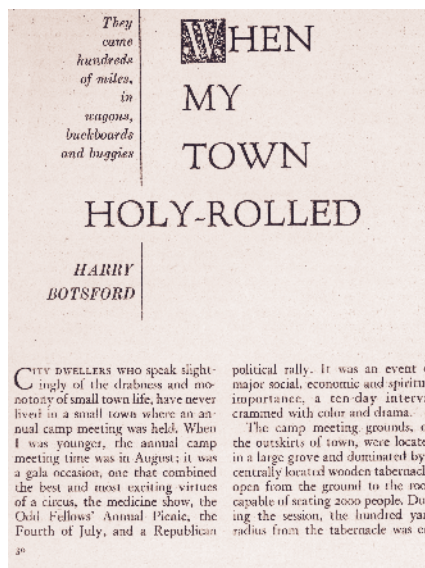
In this issue we publish a curious account of an early Free Methodist camp meeting by a not-uncritical observer.

The article, by Harry Botsford, is entitled “When My Town Holy-Rolled.” It appeared in the *American Mercury* magazine in October, 1951. This small monthly was founded by Henry L. Mencken in 1924 and was published in New York City and Concord, New Hampshire. It ceased publication in 1981.

Next to the article was this blurb: “They came hundreds of miles, in wagons, buckboards and buggies.” The original article is too long to reprint in full, so we offer a condensation. It is certainly a fascinating piece, though possibly a mix of fact and fiction. The author, a writer who was born in 1890, grew up in Pleasantville, Pennsylvania, so obviously the references are to the FM camp there.

The tone is somewhat sarcastic and satirical, though in a letter responding to complaints by an offended Free Methodist, Botsford claimed to be merely reporting what he saw. To me it seems unlikely that Free Methodists would ever have viewed the United Brethren, a sister denomination, as being consigned to “everlasting torments.” But then, this was a child’s recollections.

Much of the account does in fact ring true (at least to this writer, whose memory reaches back into the 1950s, though not to the 1910s).



Very likely my grandfather and/or great uncles on the Zahniser side would have been in attendance.

No date is given, but the camp meeting described seems to have occurred about 1915. The author in the longer article mentions several people by name, including “the Birling brothers who lived alone on an old farm over Tionesta way.” Some of the persons’ names may be fictitious, however; in his letter Botsford says names are “thinly disguised.”

Documentary History

When it appeared in 1951 the article was flagged by Alfred S. Hill, Free Methodist denominational treasurer. Hill sent it on to members of the FM Board of Administration. In his accompanying letter, dated October 4, 1951, Hill writes, “I haven’t made up my mind as to just how to evaluate this article. I do not know that it is all bad, or that there is any good in it. However, I do think it will be an item of interest and that it will be advisable for you to acquaint yourself with the same.” He noted that the *American Mercury* was “a pocket size magazine selling for 25¢.” Bishop Marston was aware of the article, but wrote that he had no intention “to enter into controversy” with regard to it.

If any of our readers recognize names or anything else from the article, or would like to provide more details, we would love to hear from you. — Editor □

When My Town HOLY-ROLLED

BY HARRY BOTSFORD

When I was younger, the annual camp meeting time was in August. It was a gala occasion, one that combined the best and most exciting virtues of a circus, medicine show, Odd Fellows' Annual Picnic, Fourth of July, and a Republican political rally. It was an event of major social, economic and spiritual importance, a ten-day interval crammed with color and drama.



Cowden Illinois Camp Meeting in 1907, Central Illinois Conference. Donated by Lillie Syfert

The campground was located in a large grove and dominated by a centrally located wooden tabernacle, open from the ground to the roof, seating 2000 people. During the session, the hundred yard radius from the tabernacle was enriched by tents, rented at \$2.50 from the camp association. Into some of these tents were crowded as many as a dozen people, for the members of the Free Methodist church in those days were prolific. Effete members of the sect could have, at slight extra cost, a board floor in their tents, but this was considered a luxury, something to be avoided by a people who traditionally had no truck with sinful self-indulgence.

It was not uncommon to see a circle of 300 tents, and the sight was very impressive. The tent dwellers often came hundreds of miles, arriving in wagons, buckboards and buggies filled with bedding

and food. Mostly they were farm folk, possessed of robust appetites, and their food supplies were substantial.

With few exceptions, local merchants looked upon the transients with rather a jaundiced eye. Most campers brought their own food. If they were forced to buy extras, they bargained shrewdly and bought little. Although the camp meetings multiplied the number of residents of the nearby village as much as twentyfold, the town's financial gains were small.

The religion practiced by the Free Methodists three or four decades ago was grim, evangelical, forthright, and loudly vocal. They had very definite ideas as to the nature of sin. The wearing of a necktie, the use of a gold collar button—these

were considered primary sins. The women dressed soberly and with uncharming simplicity. Personal adornment was likewise ungodly and to be avoided. Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, United Brethren, Unitarians were all doomed to everlasting torments in a hell that the evangelists depicted so realistically that it scared the pants off us youngsters. The Christ they worshipped was austere and sad. Laughter was not one of the gifts of the sect, for it was a sign of frivolity.

The meetings started with a sunrise prayer, swung into a series of group meetings during the day and culminated with an evening evangelistic service that might not conclude until well after midnight, depending on the number of sinners who "came forward." Meetings were punctuated with volleys of Amens and frequent Praise-the-Lords, and not a few of them were marked

by hysteria and curious manifestations that appealed strongly and morbidly to youngsters and visitors.

THE RING MEETING

The town youngsters always managed to stand in the front row for the daily sun-down "Ring Meeting." There would be good spirited singing of lively hymns, such as "We're Marching to Zion." The marchers walked smartly to the measured cadence. Interspersed with the singing would be cries of Amen! and Hallelujah! This was a testimonial meeting, in which the anointed commented favorably on what the Lord had done for them, and past sins were spoken of frankly and almost nostalgically.

One man acted out his sin, a gaunt little man with haunted eyes. People would travel miles to see him perform. He had been deeply steeped in basic sin, having been a dancing teacher before he was a brand plucked from the burning. He would timidly enter the inner circle of the ring, stand quietly, raise his head and gaze transfixed at the first stars. Then a slow smile would transfigure his face and he would dance. He was the acme of grace, a solo performer who could waltz, two-step, and also jig. As he danced, the singing would swell in rhythm. Pious feet tapped and wide smiles split the circle of stern faces.

There were several acts in the daily "Ring Meeting." A woman, solidly built, short, with a placid face and vacant stare, inevitably walked to the center of the ring and stood there immobile while others testified and sang and uttered jubilant hallelujahs. She would fall forward on her face in a dead faint or a deep trance. No one rushed forward to help her. The Power was on her. She would lie motionless for half an hour after the service was concluded. Then she would stir, climb nimbly to her feet and waddle expectantly toward the tabernacle services. Her face would be unmarked by the fall.

Perhaps the most spectacular performer was a tall farmer named Jefferson Gean. His reputation for intelligence wasn't

great. His neck was long, and his ragged moustache had a pathetic droop. But the derby perched jauntily on his head was a shining black, providing him with a rakish appearance. He stood with his wife and assorted progeny on the inner side of the circle, the current baby cradled gently in his arms. His face lit up and his Adam's apple danced as the tempo of the singing increased.

At the proper moment, Jeff Gean would tuck the baby under an arm and prance into the ring, bleating like an amorous goat. He trotted sedately around the ring, urged on by rousing Amens and ringing hallelujahs, his pace steadily increasing. At the finale he was in high gear, coattails flying, feet lifted high, the bleating increasing in volume. There was never a sound from the baby. It either enjoyed the trip or was frightened into silence.

There were no dull moments at the daily "Ring Meeting," and it served to whet the appetite for the evening service.

THE EVENING SERVICE

The youngsters usually clustered on the back benches of the dimly lighted and crowded tabernacle. We were quiet and well behaved. Otherwise, one of the brethren would grab us roughly and hustle us off the sacred premises. Our parents would be informed.

The sermons of the evangelists usually alarmed us. As we listened to their impassioned appeals, we knew we were deeply rooted in sin. As the evangelists slid into high gear, we virtually smelled the brimstone, and we almost felt the pain of surging and eternal flames. As a result, we avoided most of the preaching, reappearing for the finale.

When we returned, the harvest of lost souls would be in progress. On the platform would be half a dozen evangelists beseeching the sinner to "come forward" to be prayed over, to repent, to be saved. These men, it seems in retrospect, had an

urgency, a compelling quality in their voices that was very special and persuasive.

The sight and sound of it all was something one didn't forget. Here and there would be groups singing; their voices would swell triumphantly, then drop to a sobbing wail of hopelessness. "Almost Persuaded" was a favorite hymn for this late and dramatic hour. There would be shouts of prayers, drawn-out screams, voices that pleaded for deliverance from sin. At the base of the platform, kneeling in the straw would be dozens of repentant sinners, their faces twisted in some private spiritual agony, tears streaming down their cheeks. Their arms waved, their voices were high and hysterical. Kneeling beside them would be evangelists, helping them through this emotional crisis.

There was a bedlam of sound; moving shadows danced in the flickering gas lights. The special pleaders moved up and down the aisles, exhorting people to come up and be saved. I was frightened that one of them would appeal directly to me. I visualized myself being led down the aisle, rudely introduced to God as a primary sinner seeking salvation. My United Brethren parents would greet with extreme displeasure the news that their son had been "saved" by Free Methodists.

With the passage of hours, the shouting at the altar became still more fervent. "Praying through" a sinner was often a tedious task, but the evangelists and their helpers approached it with vigor and determination.

The ten days of camp meeting passed all too quickly. Sunday's attendance swelled into the thousands, and hundreds of horse-drawn vehicles raised clouds of dust as they arrived and left. It was a holiday time for country folks. Sundays were characterized by a series of renewals of old friendships, by picnics in the woods, by spreads of gargantuan proportions. An audit of the fried chicken, potato salad and beet pickles consumed would have

PLAIN and Simple

If we are humble in our spirit we should be plain in our dress. This is nothing more than propriety demands. If the Bible were silent on the subject sound reason would require this at our hand. The outside should harmonize with the inside. But the Bible is not silent concerning dress. ...

[We are instructed by the Apostle Peter] to adorn ourselves ... with "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price."

— B. T. Roberts, "Dress,"
The Earnest Christian (March 1890), 98.

made for most interesting statistics.

Camp meeting ended on Sunday night. With real regret we watched the people rumble away in their conveyances, their faces grimly placid, heads held high. Trails of dust marked every road as they left, a people who had been engaged in a saturnalia of sustained soul-saving, now returning to a wicked workaday world.

THIRTY YEARS LATER

Last year I revisited the old campgrounds. Tents have been supplanted by little wooden cottages; there are electric lights and sewage systems. And there is a long barracks of a camp kitchen and community dining room. Camp meeting in the modern style has lost much of its glamor and mystery. The salvation of souls, I was assured, still continues at a good pace. Yet the Free Methodist church does not have a large membership. Backsliding into sin and sordid wickedness remains at a rate comparable to that of three decades ago.

Sin, the evangelists used to say, is a pretty tough thing to down. □

(Condensed from *American Mercury* 75:334 [October 1951], pp. 30-36.)



Book Review

The Holiness Manifesto, edited by Kevin W. Mannoia and Don Thorsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). 249 pages. ISBN 10: 0802863361 (paperback).



“God is holy and calls us to be a holy people.” The holiness message is that simple. For denominations in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition, this call has shaped their very existence. However, as the Wesleyan/Holiness Study Project details, the holiness message has been ignored, obscured, and often exiled from the local church.

Beginning in 2004, this project brought together representatives from eleven holiness denominations to rediscover and reinvigorate the holiness message. In 2006 the project issued a brief “manifesto.” This book is now the finished product.

A revitalized holiness message just might be the saving grace that rejuvenates our churches. The core concept here is that interdenominational collegiality is key. People don’t want to hear about our differences but our commonalities. The volume reflects this; contributors include Jim Adams (Foursquare Church), Diane Leclerc (Nazarene), Lynn Thrush (Brethren in Christ), and Howard Snyder (Free Methodist), among others.

The book’s four sections begin with a synopsis of the present condition of the holiness message and ask about its decline. The next section examines biblical foundations, reiterating the message that God is holy and desires that same purity for us. The third section places the holiness message in historical context, while the final one focuses on reinvigorating holiness within our churches.

The book’s concern is that readers grasp the biblical heart of holiness, the historical vision of the founders, and the present possibilities

of a reinvigorated holiness message. The chapter on “Social Vision” fleshes out an oft-forgotten aspect of early holiness opposition to secret societies. William Kostlevy explains that this originally had less to do with the secrecy aspect; it was rooted in concern for the perceived major social sins of the day. Groups such as the Masons supported a distinct life for men outside the safety of family life, which led to drinking, carousing, and licentiousness. Also, very important to these abolitionist denominations was the segregated nature of many secret societies. Early holiness folk weren’t just constructing a list of do’s and don’ts; they were striving for wholesale cultural change.

Reflecting the intent that the book not merely feed the academic machine, several chapters discuss holiness at the local church level. The section “Holiness in Ministry” addresses pastoral issues in such chapters as “Local Church Impact” by Jim Adams and C. Stevens Schell and “Holiness in the City” by George McKinney. Holiness people sought widespread social change as well as personal holiness in themselves.

The Holiness Manifesto reminds us that churches in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition have a unique message of hope for the world. Rather than imbibing current generic evangelicalism, we need to reclaim the truth that God wants our salvation to begin here and now with changed lives that change the lives of others. This book can spur on the discussions begun at our own “Search for the Free Methodist Soul” symposiums. Reading *The Holiness Manifesto* in tandem with *Soul Searching the Church: Free Methodism at 150 Years* could further our denominational discussions by widening the conversation. Interdenominational book discussion groups could offer opportunities for conversations about shared ministry. In the same spirit of cooperation, the next logical step could be for local churches to join the discussion. What further creative, God-honoring work might result?

— Dr. Mindi Grieser Cromwell
Lansing, Michigan

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