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THE CAMP MEETING IN THE EARLY LIFE AND LITERATURE OF THE MID-WEST

BY ROBERT L. SHURTER

American historians have long recognized the importance of frontier conditions in shaping the lives and characters of the early settlers. Those of us who are interested in the history of American literature have been more slow to acknowledge the influence that these conditions have had on frontier literature. Yet we are coming to realize more and more the necessity for studying our early frontier literature against the social, economic, and religious life of that period; for literature, especially in times of storm and stress, is an outgrowth of life and cannot be divorced from it. With these facts in mind, it may well be of value to examine some such peculiarly frontier institution as the camp meeting in order to present its history as far as possible in the words of contemporary writers, in order to see how large a part it played in our early literature, and in order to see what was the general attitude of the time toward it.

Professor Ralph L. Rusk has already noted that "nothing was more characteristic of the religious activity of the pioneer community than the camp meetings".¹ Certainly there can be little doubt that this type of religious worship bulked large in the lives and thoughts of mid-western pioneers, catering as it did, according to James Truslow Adams, "both to the settlers' desire for company and to his need for expression in emotional life".² The camp meeting was an important event in the life of the early settler in Tennessee, Ohio, or Kentucky; sensational in a crude emotional way, it left a lasting impression on all those who participated in this type of religious worship. Thus it is only natural that the camp meeting is to be found playing a major part in the early literature of the region centering around the Ohio Valley. Indeed, the earliest literary historian of that region has noted that "vivid descriptions of the camp meeting and its impressive scenes are to be found in the writings of the early Western historians, poets, and novelists. The pioneer

¹ R. L. Rusk, *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* (New York, 1925), I, 46.

² J. T. Adams, *The Epic of America* (Boston, 1931), 127.

'revivals' furnish a theme for a sort of sacred romance or divine comedy".³ It is the purpose of this paper to give something of the history of the camp meeting, to present some of the best contemporary accounts of it, and to analyze the attitude of early literary men toward it.

The camp meeting was devised in the middle west as the most practical method of worship in a newly settled and sparsely populated country where there were few established churches. It became immensely popular, probably because of the relief it afforded to the frontier settler from a life of drab monotony lacking in any sort of emotional development. As one contemporary historian tells us, "living remote and consigned the greater part of the time to the musing loneliness of their conditions in the forests, or the prairie, when they congregate on these exciting occasions, society itself is to them a novelty and an excitement".⁴ These camp meetings were vivid, eventful periods in a rather colorless existence; consequently when men in the early middle west turned to writing, it was but natural that they devoted much of their time to descriptions of these meetings.

The earliest and most spectacular of the camp meetings took place, according to a contemporary account,⁵

Somewhere between 1800 and 1801, in the upper part of Kentucky, at a memorable place called 'Cane Ridge', where was appointed a sacramental meeting by some of the Presbyterian ministers. At which meeting, seemingly unexpected by ministers or people, the mighty power of God was displayed in a very extraordinary manner; many were moved to tears and bitter and loud crying for mercy. The meeting was protracted for weeks. Ministers of almost all denominations flocked in from far and near. The meeting was kept up by night and day. Thousands heard of the mighty work, and came on foot, on horseback, in carriages and wagons. It was supposed that there were in attendance at times during the meeting from twelve to twenty-five thousand people. Hundreds fell prostrate under the mighty power of God, as men slain in battle. . . It was supposed by eye and ear witnesses that between one and two

³ W. H. Venable, *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley* (Cincinnati, 1891), 207.

⁴ Timothy Flint, *A Condensed Geography and History of the Western States or the Mississippi Valley* (Cincinnati, 1828), I, 219.

⁵ *The Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, edited by W. P. Strickland (New York, 1856), 30.

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importance of frontiers of the early settlement history of American the influence that Yet we are coming laying our early front religious life of that arm and stress, is an it. With these facts some such peculiarly order to present its temporary writers, in early literature, and of the time toward it. l that "nothing was the pioneer commun- e can be little doubt rge in the lives and it did, according to sire for company and The camp meeting settler in Tennessee, otional way, it left a l in this type of reli- e camp meeting is to erature of the region e earliest literary his- criptions of the camp ound in the writings ovelists. The pioneer

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thousand souls were happily and powerfully converted to God during the meeting. It was not unusual for one, two, three, and four to seven preachers to be addressing the listening thousands at the same time from the different stands erected for the purpose. . . It was said, by truthful witnesses, that at times more than one thousand persons broke out into loud shouting all at once, and that the shouts could be heard for miles around.

Scenes like this, which were re-enacted hundreds of times in the years following, were nothing if not impressive, and the poets, short story writers, novelists, and biographers of the time made full use of them, sometimes for descriptive material, sometimes as a background for their stories.

Almost all of the early writers speak of the awesome and unforgettable beauty of the camp meeting at night. Characteristic is Micah Flint's poem "The Camp Meeting"⁶ in which he describes a night scene at a camp meeting in the Tennessee mountains, remembered possibly from the days of his youth:

At length the hour of evening worship came;
And on their rustic seats, fresh-cleft, and hewn
From the huge poplars, and in many a range
Of circling rows dispos'd, in quiet sat
The expectant multitude. O, 'twas a scene!
The silent thousands that were listening there,
Midst the gray columns of that ancient wood,
Its dark green roof, the rows of whitening tents,
That circled in the distance, and the clear
And sparkling waters of the mountain stream,
In torch-light gleaming, as it danc'd along;
And more than all, the rustling leaves that caught
On their moist surfaces the light, and wav'd
On every bough, now in their native green,
And now in burnished gold.

A similar scene is used by Judge James Hall, the foremost writer of short stories in the middle west at this period, as the setting for his tale, "The Backwoodsman":⁷

But nothing could exceed the solemn and beautiful effect of the meeting at night. The huts were all illuminated, and

⁶ To be found in *The Poets and Poetry of the West*, by W. T. Coggeshall (Columbus, 1860), 59.

⁷ James Hall, *Legends of the West* (Philadelphia, 1832), 11.

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lights were fastened to the trees, throwing a glare upon the overhanging canopy of leaves, now beginning to be tinged with the rich hues of autumn, which gave it the appearance of a splendid arch, finely carved and exquisitely shaded. All around was the dark gloom of the forest, deepened to intense blackness by its contrast with the brilliant light of the camp.

Unfortunately, some of the manifestations of the camp meetings were less beautiful. Almost all the witnesses speak of the tumultuous praying, shouting, shrieking, groaning, and the loud singing, which formed the chief part of the atmosphere of these meetings. James Flint describes the camp meeting as being "like a menagerie of wild beasts".⁸ From other accounts of these early writers, it is certain that the people were worked up to an emotional frenzy which led them to exhibit pathological symptoms. Almost incredible are some of these accounts; Flint, for example, in speaking of the noise and confusion of a camp meeting, says,⁹

On advancing a few paces, I discovered that the turmoil was chiefly confined within a small enclosure of about thirty feet square, in front of the orator, and that the ground occupied by the congregation was laid with felled trees for seats. A rail fence divided it into two parts, one for females and the other for males. . . The enclosure already mentioned was for the reception of those who undergo religious awakenings, and was filled by both sexes, who were exercising violently. Shouting, screaming, clapping of hands, leaping, jerking, falling, and swooning. The preacher could not be heard, great as his exertions were.

There can be no doubt that those in attendance at the camp meetings believed implicitly in divine intervention and miracles. The following account is typical of much of the frontier literature about camp meetings:¹⁰

Children were often made the instruments through which the Lord wrought. At one of these powerful displays of Divine Power, a boy about ten years old broke from the stand in time of preaching under very strong impressions, and having mounted a log at some distance and

⁸ James Flint, *Letters from America* (Edinburgh, 1822), 231.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰ *The Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley, or Pioneer Life in the West*, edited by W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati, 1856), 366.

raising his voice in a most affecting manner, cried out, "On the last day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, 'If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink' ". He attracted the main body of the congregation, and, with streaming eyes, he warned the sinners of their danger, denouncing their doom, if they persevered in sin, and strongly expressed his love for the salvation of their souls, and the desire that they would turn to God and live. By this time the press was so great that he was taken up by two men and held above the crowd. He spoke for near an hour in that convincing eloquence that could be inspired only from heaven, and when exhausted, and language failed to describe the feelings of his soul, he raised his handkerchief, and dropping it, cried, "Thus, O Sinner, will you drop into hell unless you forsake your sins and turn to God". At this moment the power of God fell upon the assembly, and sinners fell as men slain in mighty battle, and the cries for mercy seemed as though they would rend the heavens, and the work spread in a manner which human language cannot describe.

Strangest and most unique of all the phenomena attendant on camp meetings were "the jerks"¹¹—a strange physical reaction caused by lack of control over the muscles of the body because of too intense emotional excitement. Lorenzo Dow describes the "jerks" as he first witnessed them in Tennessee:¹²

Here I saw 'the jerks' and some danced; a strange exercise indeed; however, it is involuntary, yet requires the consent of the will; i. e., the people are taking to jerking irresistibly, and if they try to resist it, it worries them much, yet it is attended by no bodily pain, and those who are exercised to dance, which in the pious seems an antidote to the jerks; if they resist, it brings deadness and barrenness over the mind; but when they yield to it, they feel happy, although it is a great cross. . . Their eyes when dancing seemed to be fixed upwards as if upon an invisible object and they lost to all below.

Another observer tells us of¹³

¹¹ For a psychological explanation of "the Jerks", see C. C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West* (Chicago, 1916).

¹² L. Dow, *The History of a Cosmopolite or Lorenzo Dow's Journal* (Fourth edition, Washington, Ohio, 1848), 215.

¹³ *The Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley*, 365.

A certain Dr. P. and a lady from Lexington who having heard much of the involuntary jerkings and fallings which attended the exercises, entered into an agreement between themselves that, should either of them be thus strangely attacked or fall, the other was to stand by to the last. It was not long until the lady was brought down in all her pride, a poor sinner in the dust before her God. The Doctor, agitated, came up and felt for her pulse; but alas! her pulse was gone. At this he turned pale, and, staggering a few paces, he fell beneath the power of the same invisible hand. After remaining for some time in this state, they both obtained peace and went home rejoicing. They both lived and died happy Christians. Thousands were affected in the same way.

These phenomena of falling unconscious and of jerking must have soon become commonplace, for another witness says, "I have seen more than a hundred sinners fall like dead men. . . . I have seen more than five hundred persons jerking at one time in my large congregations".¹⁴ Interesting and characteristic is the contemporary judgment of the cause of these phenomena:¹⁵

I always looked upon the jerks as a judgment sent from God, first to bring sinners to repentance; and secondly, to show professors that God could work with or without means, and over and above means, and do whatever seemeth him good, to the glory of his grace and the salvation of the world.

Unfortunately for the universal application of this pious explanation, the preachers themselves were sometimes afflicted, as we may learn from the following account by the Rev. Jacob Young:¹⁶

In 1804 I first witnessed the strange exercise—the jerks; although I had heard much about it a few months previous. . . . A Rev. Mr. Doke, a Presbyterian clergyman of good standing, having charge of a congregation in the neighborhood of Jonesboro, was the first man of eminence in this region that came under its influence. It alarmed his family and congregation. The affection [*sic*] would often seize him in the pulpit, with so much severity, that a spectator might fear it would break his neck and dislocate his

¹⁴ *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright*, 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ Jacob Young, *The Autobiography of a Pioneer* (Cincinnati, 1857), 135.

joints. He would laugh immoderately, stand and halloo at the top of his voice, finally leap from the pulpit and run to the woods, screaming like a crazy man. When the exercise was over, he would return to the Church as rational and calm as ever.

The accounts which I have quoted are typical of almost all of the early literature dealing with camp meetings. Hundreds of similar descriptions may be found in the stories, poems, and biographies of the writers of Tennessee, Ohio, and Kentucky in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. This abundance of literature dealing with the camp meeting is explained, as I have suggested and as the descriptions themselves show, by the awesome beauty and the sensational nature of the events of these revivals.

The attitude of the writers toward the camp meeting is less easy to explain, for almost without exception, every writer who mentions the camp meeting praises it. This is partly explained, of course, by the fact that many of the writers were clergymen and approved of the camp meeting as a practical means of worship. Yet, rather curious it is that none of the writers were willing to admit that the camp meeting had only temporary results at best; that those "converted" remained so only a short time; and that in many cases vice, sexual immorality, and emotional hysteria were to be found at these meetings.

The formula of defence offered for the camp meeting is practically the same in all instances. The fact that the Bible contains accounts of meetings at which Christ preached in the open air, is always mentioned; the camp meeting is the survival of these early meetings. Typical of this type of argument for the camp meeting is the following:¹⁷

Look at the example of our blessed Saviour. He might have preached every Sabbath in the Jewish synagogue, if he had chosen; but he did not. . . . At times we find him in the wilderness, or in the grove; surrounded by many thousands, who had nothing better to sit on than the green grass. Nor did these crowds come out in the morning from their homes, and return the same evening; but they continued together day after day, to hear the Saviour's words.

Then it was always pointed out, as in the following account, that God's temples were in the forest and the fields; consequently, those

¹⁷ James Gallaher, *The Western Sketchbook* (Boston, 1850), 361.

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They could feel, if they did not see it artistically, that they were in the house of God and at the gate of Heaven. No Michael Angelo had planned the temple where they knelt, and none of the great masters had adorned it with the glories of their art. But God himself had builded it, and His hand had spread the tints that glowed upon it and all around it. In the simplicity of their hearts, they entered it as their Father's house.

Finally, the early writer was certain to point out the fact that the camp meeting converted many profligates and sinners. This last thought runs through all of the literature about the camp meeting. Sinners came to the meetings to ridicule and to scoff, but they fell under the hand of God, and, as Micah Flint says,¹⁹

The proud ones, looking down in scorn
From fancied intellectual heights, whose hearts
The world had scarr'd; e'en these, unconscious, caught
Th' infectious weakness, like the rest, and though
They only "came to mock, remain'd to pray".

Such, then, was the early camp meeting and the rather uncritical attitude of the writer toward it. As an unusual feature of frontier life, it reveals frontier ideas, customs and character in a vivid manner; and since the frontier has played so large a part in shaping American institutions and temperament, we cannot ignore that phase of it revealed by the literature dealing with camp meetings.

¹⁸ W. C. Howells, "Camp Meetings in the West Fifty Years Ago", in *Lippincott's Magazine*, X, 213 (August, 1872).

¹⁹ Micah P. Flint, "The Camp Meeting", in *The Poets and Poetry of the West*, edited by W. T. Coggleshall (Columbus, 1860), 62.