

Camp Meeting Breakthrough

BY KEN HORN



It was called Rogues' Harbor ... and it had earned the name. Logan County, on the Kentucky frontier of the 1790s, had attracted the worst that society had to offer. Murderers, thieves and villains of every stripe had taken haven in the far west of the day, in a place unlikely to scrutinize evildoers.

Then James McGready, a pastor who maintained three small Presbyterian churches, spurred his congregations to earnestly pray for the lost. Church members signed a covenant to pray and fast that souls would be saved. Quarterly Communion services became times noted for the move of God.

Some of the most notorious sinners in the area were saved when the first stirrings of revival were seen at the Communion in July 1799.

In June of 1800, 500 people showed up for the Communion at McGready's Red River congregation. McGready described a mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit. "The floor was soon covered with the [spiritually] slain; their screams for mercy pierced the heavens," he wrote of the emotionally charged meeting.

News of the meeting spread, and the following month McGready was astounded when some 8,000 people gathered at Gasper River. He wrote of Pastor William McGee's message at one meeting:

"The power of God seemed to shake the whole assembly. Towards the close of the sermon, the cries of the distressed arose almost as loud as his voice. After the congregation was dismissed the solemnity increased, till the greater part of the multitude seemed engaged in the most solemn manner. No person seemed to wish to go home — hunger and sleep seemed to affect nobody — eternal things were the vast concern. Here awakening and

converting work was to be found in every part of the multitude; and even some things strangely and wonderfully new to me."

A new spiritual phenomenon — the camp meeting — had been born, and Logan County would never again be the same. Revival had transformed the frontier, changing the county from Rogues' Harbor to Souls' Harbor.

Other large camp meetings were held in 1800. But it was not until August of 1801, at Cane Ridge, also in Kentucky, that the movement that would come to be known as the Second Great Awakening found its western flashpoint.

Barton W. Stone, who had sat under McGready's ministry in North Carolina and had himself become a frontier preacher, had attended one of the Logan County communions. Deeply affected, Stone made plans for his own Communion — at Cane Ridge. No one came close to anticipating what God would do there.

When the Cane Ridge Communion commenced, a staggering 25,000 people gathered in the wilderness, camping in hundreds of wagons. A makeshift city arose. Christians came, but so did the dregs of society — many of them simply to see the spectacle and mock. But numbers of these skeptics had unexpected encounters with God ... and mocked no more as He transformed their lives.

Attendee Moses Hoge described "sinners dropping down on every hand, shrieking, groaning, crying for mercy," sometimes in distress for sin, sometimes in "raptures of joy." It was said at times the sound of thousands shouting together could be heard for miles. Some compared it to "the roar of Niagara."

Though the camp meetings were criticized for emotional excesses — sometimes justly — that emotional-

ism more often reflected a genuine work of the Spirit. The quality of the fruit of the revival — its continuing spiritual effect — could not be denied. The interdenominational nature of the meetings also proclaimed that something of God was indeed afoot. Despite vast differences, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist ministers shared the preaching duties, often with multiple sermons being preached concurrently. (There were no sound systems then.)

Prayer groups sprang up and multiplied; testimonies and exhortations came from hundreds of mouths; groups sang hymns — often several different songs could be heard at the same time.

Some historians have suggested Cane Ridge may have been the most influential religious gathering in the nation's history. For many years, Christians seeking revival commonly prayed, "Lord, make it like Cane Ridge."

Cane Ridge's influence is easily seen. Camp meetings spread quickly, cropping up throughout Kentucky and Tennessee and reaching many Southern states. Camp meetings continued to thrive as a mainstay of some evangelical denominations throughout much of the last century. Today some can still be found.

The camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening did more than spawn a new religious culture. They produced changed lives that, for the most part, stayed changed. The meetings were instruments of God that brought genuine revival and deeply affected American society for the better. **tpe**

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