

Revival

Nightly, 7:00

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photo **WILL ETLING**



AT THE END of a low-profile street in the suburbs of southern Maine there is a field. In the field there is a large white tent and a sign reading TENT REVIVAL SERVICES / NIGHTLY 7:00, and inside the tent is God, or the way back to God, depending. All you have to do is come in and find a place among the folding wooden chairs.

Tent revivals never really went away, though the centuries-old tradition doesn't exert the influence it once did. According to many accounts the American tent revival has its roots in Logan County, Kentucky, which in turn is thought to descend from the rural Scottish Holy Fairs that so amused Robert Burns ("There's some are full o' love divine; there's some are full o' brandy"). Eighteenth-century Logan County was a rough frontier best known for its embrace of every available vice, but a Presbyterian minister named James McGready had three congregations there, at the Red, Muddy, and Gasper rivers. In a letter to a friend McGready described the toil of his "awakening work," which he considered a success when members of his flock "were savingly brought home to Christ."

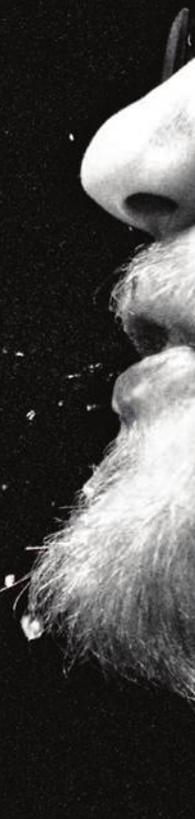
The flock grew fast in the summer of 1800. At Red River "multitudes were struck down under awful conviction," McGready reported, "praying and crying for redemption." Within weeks a religious fever swept the area, fanned by local ministers and traveling preachers aflame with Protestantism's Second Great Awakening. Believers—and, more importantly, those who were not yet believers—formed encampments where they could hear sermons and be saved. As historian James Bach McMaster has it, "Crops were

left half gathered; every kind of work was left undone; cabins were deserted; in large settlements there did not remain one soul." A legendary meeting in 1801 attracted tens of thousands of people to the woods around Cane Ridge, in Bourbon County.

Later on the spirit of this Great Revival was held aloft with tent poles and showmanship. Tent revivals became part performance, part crusade, part worship, promising healing and a chance to speak in tongues. Sometimes a preacher who was very talented would perform a miracle—a real one, or at least a miracle of convincing. These days famous evangelists have turned to television, and rural worshippers can download podcasts of sermons, but tent revivals continue in various faith traditions in many corners of the country. Some are annual events that have persisted through the years. Others have sprung up brand-new in incongruous place. Last summer a Pentecostal minister raised tents for a weeklong revival in Southampton, New York, just down the road from the tony Shinnecock Hills Golf Club.

Here in suburban Maine, the tent was put up by nondenominational pastors who have carried their revival around the state for four decades. Inside the tent, people sit facing a long platform stage. At the back of the stage hangs a red satin curtain on which a banner has been pinned—a lesson from Zechariah: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord." There is not much else in the way of décor, although there are boxes of tissues stage left and stage right. It is interesting to look at 60 seated souls and wonder who might cry, and when.

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No matter where it happens, a tent revival means music: church music, as performed by men in neckties and women in modest skirts. Guitar-piano-drum songs about being lifted up and carried by Jesus. Songs about tears turned to triumph. Songs about believing that these things happen. “Thank you, Lord,” a pastor shouts to the heavens as he prepares to sing. “Gimme a G,” he tells the electric keyboard player.

Sounds spread wider and higher in a tent than they do indoors, and every note is amplified by the smell of freshly-trampled grass and sharp shadows from the floodlights attached to poles overhead. Outside there is a waning gibbous moon and the first chill winds of fall. More people trickle in from the dark parking area, one at a time, in pairs, carrying children. The tent is a magnet for church regulars and curious passersby, plus a few disoriented moths.

Tonight a young evangelist who calls himself Brother Matt is preaching. He is 27 years old and built like a soccer player, agile and ready to capitalize on opportunities. He has been saved for 14 years and preaching for 12. At first he preached on street corners in Portland, Maine, holding forth on the waterfront and in a plaza downtown. There are lots of people clamoring for attention in these places—buskers, jugglers, panhandlers, protesters, touts hawking tourist excursions—and street-corner evangelists are often ignored, occasionally insulted, rarely complimented. But somehow the experience gave Matt confidence. Now he can stand before 60 people in a tent, perspiring in a black dress shirt, letting his voice escalate until it cracks. Praise Jesus.

A friend asked an interesting question the other day, Matt announces at the beginning of his sermon, and this question has been heavy on his mind. If it’s called a revival, what exactly is being revived? The answer is easy, it turns out. Your soul. A change can come over you, if you let it, right here in this tent. You can be refreshed and made new. It is never too late to return to God, Matt adds later. He has known people who fell prey to drinking and drugs and worse. Still. If you have breath, you can have hope, through God’s grace. The message is one of uncomplicated optimism, as much enticement to skeptics as it is assurance for the faithful.

After the sermon Matt invites anyone who’s ready to come forward and join him at the altar. It is not really an altar—just a low arched ramp with railings in front of the stage—but almost everyone in the tent goes to kneel with him. Some rock silently on their knees. Others murmur, close their eyes and put their hands in the air. Many seem overcome. A little girl, maybe 8, goes to fetch tissues because she sees people with tears running down their cheeks.

When the musicians strike up the last hymn, people stand to gather their belongings and corral restless children. This is the time when a stranger sitting alone in the back will be noticed. People make their way through the rows of seats, hands outstretched. “I’m so glad to see you,” they say, as though the stranger has just returned from a long journey and was missed.