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Revive Us Again

Helen Thames Raley

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RELICS

A sweet and easy trombone sound wailed over the vacant lot, down the railroad tracks, and up toward Main Street. Sometimes, it could be heard out on the Lake Road toward Kirtley, and even up on Cemetery Hill. Folks who had worked hard all day and were just too tired after supper to change into church clothes, sat on their porches quietly listening to the old familiar songs. Later, they would catch some of the preacher's sermon if he would just speak up and not talk too fast. The Baptists' summer revival in a small Western Oklahoma community was going strong.

It was the trombone playing that made this one different from all the other summer meetings. The crowds got bigger every night. People wanted to know what was going on.

The young, good-looking "singer" from the Baptist Seminary had come to help the preacher in a two-weeks' evangelistic meeting. He had hardly hit town until his amazing musical versatility began to get things moving. Nobody would ever forget his first performance. In his white linen suit, his black hair parted in the middle, slicked down and shining against his silver trombone, he swayed the congregation up and down the jubilations of sheer rapture. To rest his fine tenor voice, he played the third verse of every song on his horn.

A stillness caught the sound and sent it right up to heaven. A suspension of breath lifted the most skeptical right up there also; those most ardent were already in flight. The romance of it all never diminished, even when it was announced that this heraldic charmer had a wife and child down in Ft. Worth.

So the singing and the playing and the preaching would go on for two weeks. Preparations, however, had begun much earlier as women and girls planned their revival wardrobes, a supply of cool summer dresses of voile and dimity, with an organdy for special nights. Hill's and Chancellor's, the two dry goods stores in town, sold extra seersucker or cotton trousers for the men. White shirts were kept in starched readiness. Gardening and canning projects were now finished for the year, crops were laid by, nothing new was started, and lazy August days lasted through long summer evenings.

Social life accelerated as the revival got underway. With hair done up in curlers all morning, the ladies of the congregation prepared their finest Sunday meals for every day, and "company" suppers and parties every evening. The preacher and the singer never ate better. Homemade ice cream and the town's finest layer cakes



by Helen Thames Raley

were available for after-church gatherings on porches, or for singing around somebody's piano, or maybe for choir practice.

When the sun went down, the crowd began to gather. A few curious onlookers parked their high-topped Model T's on side streets or in the alley just to listen. Quieter cars parked a little closer, their occupants getting out to sit on running boards.

New one-by-twelve boards from the lumber yard, donated for two weeks, and now laid across nail kegs, provided seating arrangements that were cool and not too uncomfortable, at least for the first hour. A center aisle led up to the improvised altar, the wood platform built by a carpenter who donated his labor. The careful placing of the golden oak pulpit stand from the church building enhanced all these arrangements with authenticity. The piano, protected by a tarpaulin loaned for the duration by the Ice Company, had seen better days. In spite of gaps in the ivories and a few soundless keys, the music was still there. At times,

the pedal worked very well.

With the magic turn of a switch, the electric lights flashed across the scene in a fiery brilliance that ante-dated used car lots that would come within the next two or three decades.

Come one, Come all, everybody's welcome! At last, the long anticipated event broke the monotony of the summer. Brightly colored handbills announcing time, place, and participants, had been delivered all over town, tucked in screen doors, and prominently displayed on counters in all the stores. Like the trombone-playing, this advertising was something new; but the Baptists, the most thriving denomination in town, were known for their modern methods, and for their strong convictions about the worth of their summer revival.

Off to a good, peppy start! Chorus after chorus, first the ladies sang, then the men, then all together, softer, louder, everybody! For exciting effect, the pianist went into a higher octave, the melody then played in the left hand, the trombone sliding in on the third verse. A tremelo on



ILLUSTRATION BY J. VAN ORSDOL

the last verse was an exciting innovation.

"Be seated, please," was the directive. Due for a good rest by now, the perspiring choir members glistened in the blazing glare of the electric lights as they settled themselves in rows of wooden folding chairs borrowed from the Funeral Parlor, whose palm leaf fans accrued much advertising.

Squirming and giggling on the first two rows, the Booster Band children were about to explode with unaccountable energy at the end of a long, hot summer day. Most of the afternoon, they had practiced their choruses. Now in stiff, starched shirts and dresses, each properly badged with "Booster Band" labels, they could hardly wait to perform... two songs.

"Brighten the corner where you are...."
and

"A sunbeam, a sunbeam, Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, A sunbeam, a sunbeam, I'll be a sunbeam for Him." On the last phrase, each child turned involuntarily for approval from beaming parents in the congregation.

In a different mood, the song service continued. Bouncing enthusiasm gave way to a Hawaiian harp effect as a favorite song was solicited. Surely, there was nothing to compare with such beauty, such soul-satisfaction, flung out across the lot, into the cars, on to the porches, far down to the river.... "He lives on high, He lives on high,....Someday, He's coming again....."

Then, everybody relaxed, at ease in Zion, and sat back to wait for the "special music." Every evening, it was a surprise. And now, there was a kind of ecstasy as the best alto in town blended her voice with the singer's sweet tenor, rendering the popular favorite, "Out of the Ivory Palaces." It just literally took one's breath away. A solemn hush swept over the crowd.

The effect was almost ruined, however, by the preacher himself, fiery and impatient to get on with his preaching. His words came in a rush. There was instant attention. Time was of the essence all right, with doom right there in town. He exhorted, he extolled. Virtue and inte-

grity were found wanting, just as in the Bible.

This is what he said. The mighty words, the powerful words caught up in the clichés and stilted phrases of that generation, were familiar. The Christian life called for repentance and righteousness, and everybody knew exactly what he was talking about, although he didn't come right out and call a spade a spade. With his sun-streaked, straw-colored hair thrashed about, his face red with heat and exertion, he cut the air with his incisive, assailing pronouncements. Occasionally, there was a slight break in the torrent of words. Then, mopping his face with a damp, wrinkled handkerchief, he would lapse into a pleasant informality that gave some relief from the hell-fire voice of the prophet.

No one moved. The children sat motionless. Solemnity gave way to a descent from glory hovering around the edges of the crowd, up the aisle and on to the platform.

Over and over the endless verses produced the sinner. Nowhere in town or in the country was there a place to hide, a "cleft in the rock"; certainly, there was no privacy along this sawdust trail up the aisle to shake the preacher's hand. In most cases it was the sharing of a strange and significant step with friends and neighbors. Except for a few dramatic incidents, the in-gathering of souls brought few changes. Life just went on as usual, accepted and secure, summer after summer, but time-honored virtues associated with religion were sure to be bolstered by those set-apart days when the Baptist revival relieved the monotony of summer. For a while, there was a fervor for goodness.

The service finally ended. Sleeping babies were roused from their pallets on the grass. Cars eased down the street, Model T's sputtered around the corner, and folks sitting on their porches slammed and hooked the screen doors as they went inside. Somebody tied down the tarpaulin around the piano. The lights were switched off.

Now it was bedtime. A faint breeze had come up. In anticipation of tomorrow night's service and hopes for a big crowd, a few of the faithful seemed reluctant to leave. Somebody said it might rain before morning because of the ring around the moon, visible now above the tall trees on Gresham Street.

"Well, Goodnight." Footsteps were easy, walking home. The only sound was the switch engine shunting freight cars to another track before the midnight train came in.