THE BERGEN CAMP MEETING
IN THE AMERICAN HOLINESS MOVEMENT

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The American holiness movement was rooted primarily in John Wesley’s theology of entire sanctification. Melvin Dieter traces the revival of that theology to the late 1830’s, when Methodist publications began taking seriously a new interest in both the doctrine and experience of Christian perfection.¹ Charles Finney’s experience of sanctifying grace (1836) reveals the spread of holiness piety beyond Methodism, and suggests its prior development in the earlier part of the decade.²

The holiness revival is impossible to understand apart from its more general evangelical context, which by 1831 was the major religious phenomenon in the new republic. The central theological thrust of the evangelicals — Arminianism harnessed to the revival technique — was shared by the holiness preachers as well. It was their foundation. The emphasis on entire sanctification was built upon the assumption of evangelical conversion and commitment and was experienced in the same manner.

At about the time of the 1837 depression, the revival fire that had been blazing its way through the eastern cities and across the western frontier began to subside. The advocates of holiness offered as a remedy for decline what they regarded as a crucial and neglected part of evangelical religion. Though explicit in the writings and ministry of Wesley, sanctification — that second work of grace that would overpower the inclination of sin — had fallen into disuse among his followers. Nathan Bangs said in 1851:

I was well aware that many of our preachers and people had become lukewarm, to say no more of it, upon the subject of entire sanctification. For though it is a prominent doctrine of our Church . . . I found many that appeared quite indifferent respecting it, while a few manifested a decided hostility . . .³

Generations later William Warren Sweet could say that “in the last two decades previous to the Civil War, Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection was largely neglected and had become little more than a creedal

²See also, Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper’s Millenium (New York, 1978).
matter among Methodist bodies.” Peter Cartwright, so vocal about the decline of other aspects of Methodist life, was content to quietly mention this one without special comment.  

Oddly enough, the revival of holiness doctrine began in the cities of the northeast, where revivalism itself was most heavily criticized. The longing for Christian perfection, no longer to be dormant in (or limited to) Methodist circles, emerged as “a new force within the American revival tradition.” It was within Methodism — which was the evangelical movement par excellence — and in those circles which adopted Methodist ways of thinking and acting, that the ideal of holiness spread. Methodist theology was so taking the field that Presbyterians Finney and Robert Baird and Episcopal Bishop Charles McIlvaine were preaching it. But though it flourished well beyond the institutional domain of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the heart of the movement remained Wesleyan.

Today its message seems very confusing. At one moment it appears to be a simple resurgence of the revival spirit which had been growing in America since Cane Ridge, and really since England’s evangelical revival. At other times it takes on the appearance of the evangelical reform movements, such as abolition or temperance, with which it often coalesced. To some the movement involved naive assumptions about the possibilities of human nature. Many institutionally minded clergy would see only a reactionary, quarrelsome band of ecclesiastical mavericks. But its identity is deeper and bolder than any of these initial impressions can reveal.

The holiness movement picked up several strands of theology and religious culture. They include eighteenth century German pietism, Wesley’s theology, the American camp meeting, and what must be seen as an impulse toward moral and spiritual transformation which is rooted in Christian Scripture and history.

In its emphasis on the instantaneous appropriation of the “second blessing,” the holiness movement was uniquely Wesleyan and revivalistic. But apart from that very important feature, parallels can be seen in Tertullian’s Montanism, Western monasticism, the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of theosis, and elsewhere. The movement was not a totally new thing. Nor can it be explained solely in terms of the American setting in

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5 W. P. Strickland, ed., Autobiography of Peter Cartwright (Cincinnati, 1856). Cartwright criticizes the acceptance of slavery (pp. 129, 157, 164-5, 244, 361, 411, 426, 439), pew rents (p. 481), formalized worship (p. 117), wealth and conspicuous consumption (pp. 234-5). He also mourned the decline of family prayer, prayer meetings, and class meetings (pp. 515-20). On holiness, see p. 130.
7 Dieter, Holiness Revival, p. 1.
8 A Monk of the Eastern Church, Orthodox Spirituality (Crestwood, NY, 1978).
which it developed. Rather, it represents one of many manifestations in history of a basic, underlying theme. "The quest for perfect sanctification or holiness," says Winthrop Hudson, "is as old as Christianity."9

Yet given these ancient and profound roots, the American holiness revival was nonetheless very American, both in form and context. For all its recognition of human sin, perfectionism could also see an unlimited frontier of the spirit, open to all who would earnestly seek it. Christian perfectionism and American national optimism "were to be regular travelling companions throughout the nineteenth century — each undoubtedly helping the other along the way."10 The apparently limitless secular opportunities of the frontier and the political freedom of the new republic had their spiritual counterparts. Among these were the pioneering spirit of circuit riders and the voluntaristic reform impulse of the new cities (the personal/social perfectionism of Finney).11

The holiness revivalists never saw the challenge of "reforming the continent and spreading Scriptural holiness across the land" as a purely human endeavor. Theirs was a dependence on the grace of God, not only to "convert the sinner," but to purify human nature and transform human society. Only the supernatural agency of the Holy Spirit, experienced directly and dramatically by the believer (in community with other believers), could make America successful and the Church fruitful.

Holiness advocates like Phoebe Palmer and Sarah Lankford also hoped and believed that the reconciling power of the Spirit, experienced in their midst, would one day draw together the disparate factions of Protestantism.12 It did not happen that way. Both before and after the Civil War, Episcopal Methodism fragmented over holiness and its related social causes. During the 1850's, for instance, the Genesee Conference in western New York was torn by disputes between holiness critics and institutionalists. Led by Benjamin Titus Roberts and other members of Conference, a militant holiness faction was expelled and subsequently organized the Free Methodist Church (1860). The movement for holiness in mainstream Methodism was by no means dead. Indeed it experienced its greatest vitality in the latter decades of the century with the founding of numerous new campgrounds and the publication of a large body of literature. But the fragmentation would also continue, as newer emphases, disagreements, and class distinctions sought free expression.13

It is also important to recall that the movement, especially in the cities, had a vital non-Wesleyan tributary in the liberalizing Calvinism of

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9Hudson, Religion, p. 342; see Dieter, Holiness Revival, pp. 3-4, 6.
10Dieter, Holiness Revival, p. 5.
11Dickson D. Bruce, And They All Sang Halleluia (Knoxville, 1974), pp. 42ff; Timothy Smith, ed., Charles Finney, The Promise of the Spirit (Minneapolis, 1980).
12Dieter, Holiness Revival, pp. 26ff, 37; Leslie Ray Marston, From Age to Age A Living Witness (Winona Lake, Ind., 1960), p. 139.
New England. Calvinists consistently formed a major part of the opposition to revivalism of whatever stripe, yet some Calvinists were driven by denominational competition and by a real passion for souls to become as active in revival as their Arminian counterparts. To Wesley, a Calvinist evangelist was a contradiction in terms — and so it seemed to many New England divines. Charles Finney and others who broke with the old Calvinism were nineteenth century heirs of those who sought to transcend the contradiction and open the gates to salvation.

By mid-nineteenth century, Arminianism and the revival had carried the day, ushering in the "Methodist age of American Church History." Finding the new measures irresistible, many Baptists and Presbyterians would do their best to justify the change which they were determined to make. Albert Barnes, a Presbyterian evangelical, made it clear that he could accept "no doctrine which will seem to be inconsistent with the free and full offer of salvation to every human being . . ." John Wesley could have asked for no more. The victory was decisive, even if not universal. Only one further step was required to secure a place for perfection in the Arminian gospel. By 1850, some version of holiness preaching could be found in every part of the country and in a great variety of churches. Not even education could necessarily divide the ranks, as self-taught frontier preachers offered essentially the same message as their more sophisticated brethren in the cities.

The revival and perfectionist spirit of the early nineteenth century expressed itself frequently in reform movements, such as the effort to abolish slavery. Like holiness theology, the opposition to slavery can be traced to the British revival of the previous century and was an important, though contested, concern of American Methodism from the beginning. Sanctification theology formed the central, integrating issue around which its advocates gathered and for which they sometimes fought. But the decline and renewal of that doctrine and experience were not unrelated to the social issues which concerned evangelicals generally. To many, the entire revival, with all its social ramifications, seemed to be at stake.

The decline in the late 1830's was, to be sure, temporary, but it would be repeated in more permanent fashion later. There were observers at every juncture who saw the pattern unfold. The changes were coming on

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14 Miller, *Life of the Mind*, ch. 3. High church Anglicans, Unitarians, and German Lutheran and Reformed Churches also typically opposed the evangelicals.
16 Robert Thompson, quoted in Dieter, ibid., p. 21.
17 Ibid.
every front, causing many to conclude that Methodism was losing its identity piecemeal. B. W. Gorham wrote that by the 1840's the Methodists were "silently and gradually" withdrawing from the use of the camp meeting.19 Much later (1894), J. O. Peck had to argue for the continued validity of revivals. "Methodism," he wrote, "in her best expression is a genuine revival..."20 And he had to remind his generation that "ours has always been a revival church, and when it drops this characteristic it will lose its Methodistic character."21

The class meeting was also falling on hard times. Led by laymen and exercising discipline, as well as fellowship and nurture, the classes conserved the fruits of evangelistic efforts. Peter Cartwright warned (1856) that "just as sure as our preachers neglect their duties in enforcing the rules on class meetings ... just so sure the power of religion will be lost in the Methodist Episcopal Church."22 Likewise Bishop Morris said that "to abandon class meetings would be virtually to abandon Methodism."23 By 1874 the process had gone far enough that John Atkinson could say:

The decline of the class meeting in Methodism in later years, with consequent decline in the importance of spiritual leadership drawn from the laity, has brought decline likewise in Methodist discipline and spiritual nurture.24

Similar warnings and laments can be found for many significant sub-issues within the life of the revival, and especially within Methodism. They together reveal a pattern of religious decline (loss of original purpose and characteristic methodology) which parallels a time of social and economic advance. Winthrop Hudson makes this connection, noting that "as Methodism gained in numbers, wealth, and social status, signs of laxity began to appear."25 Included in this laxity he cites the substitution of fashionable for plain dress, the formalization of worship in place of an earlier directness and simplicity, and the uncomfortable juxtaposition of rich and poor in the churches.26 What B. T. Roberts found at Niagara Street in Buffalo in 1853 represented a very general pattern growing throughout the Church. It was a protest against this pattern which provoked reprisals and culminated in the Free Methodist Church. "Methodists at first were a despised people."27 The holiness people recognized a change in that relationship to society, and they resisted. Their

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20Jonas Oramel Peck, The Revival and the Pastor (New York, 1894), p. 44.
21Ibid., p. 39.
22Strickland, Peter Cartwright, p. 520.
23Marston, From Age to Age, p. 146.
24John Atkinson, The Class Leader (New York, 1874), p. 82.
27Marston, From Age to Age, p. 152.
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criticisms had social and economic, as well as moral and ecclesiastical dimensions, but they revolved around what was regarded as most basic: theological and spiritual reality. As evangelicals, they blamed the decline in revival for what they saw taking place. As holiness people, they added to their diagnosis the neglect of that particular teaching. In this they harkened back to John Wesley himself, who in 1776 wrote concerning the Methodist work in Launcestown:

Here I found the plain reason why the work of God had gained no ground in this circuit all the year. The preachers had given up the Methodist testimony. Either they did not speak of perfection at all (the peculiar doctrine committed to our trust), or they spoke of it only in general terms, without urging believers to “go on to perfection,” and to expect it every moment. And whenever this is not earnestly done, the work of God does not prosper.”28

Even though sanctification theology was an integral part of Methodism, attracting outsiders as well, the attempts to revive and promote it met with opposition. Further controversy arose out of its association with social reform and its criticism of the decline in many keystone practices of Methodism. Beyond these concerns were still others created by the movement itself.

Like the charismatic prayer meetings of our own time, holiness meetings became a prominent para-church feature of the movement. They experienced one kind of unity but created a new antagonism in the process. Fear of divisiveness grew as the special holiness concern seemed to express itself in a common mindset with an inherent assumption of superiority. Many feared the “house churches” as Anglicans had once feared the Methodists.

A further divisive issue was that of lay involvement and leadership. Methodism had made it easy for laymen to become preachers and had also given considerable influence to class leaders in local communities. This was especially true on the frontier, where circuits were vast and the preachers could only infrequently minister in person to a given society. But the “higher levels” of the Church were the exclusive domain of prominent clergy. More than once this clerical monopoly was challenged, as in the Methodist Protestant and Wesleyan secessions, and the “Nazarite” laymen’s conventions in western New York (1850’s). Like the camp meetings, holiness gatherings gave opportunity for lay people to speak, offer testimonies and exhortations, teach, organize, and even lead.

Pushing the issue even farther was the matter of women’s role in the movement. As with the larger revival, so in its holiness component, women played an expanding role, engaging in many of the same functions as men and even, in the case of Phoebe Palmer, giving spiritual leadership to the

28John Wesley, Journal (London), vol. 6, p. 120.

29Dieter, Holiness Revival, pp. 41ff.
entire movement. The M. E. Church was not prepared to move as quickly as the movement, and later in the century holiness churches were "among the first to grant full ministerial rights to women."181

While the emphasis on Christian holiness continued to develop in non-Methodist circles, Methodism remained the environment and forum for the core of the movement. It also became, for some, a battleground. Within its bounds we can see both a growing acceptance and a growing resistance. Eventually, many holiness people would find themselves (sometimes against their will) in new churches, no longer welcome or comfortable in mainstream Methodism. Others would stay and be part of a very influential holiness emphasis within the M. E. Church.

The Genesee Conference saw the conflict turn to acrimony and expulsion. The holiness camp, labelled "Nazarenes" by their opponents, believed that the Church was gaining the world at the expense of its soul. They called the institutionalist camp the "Buffalo Regency," indicating both the power and urban flavor of their opposition. In the "Nazarene" view, the characteristic beliefs and practices of Methodism were dying before their eyes. To the "Regency," the holiness faction appeared intransigent, divisive, and reactionary. People were being pulled in different directions in the struggle between original vision and changing times; "Christ against culture" and Christ living more comfortably with culture.

Pew rents were especially irksome to the "Nazarenes." They kept the poor out of church as they financed the "urban cathedrals" that seemed so antithetical to the Methodist ethos. The abolishing of pew rents by the small sect partially explains the term Free Methodist.

Long an issue nationally, slavery was no less important in western New York, where it enraged men like B. T. Roberts, who was to become the first General Superintendent of Free Methodism: "Up to the day that slavery was abolished by the sword, there were thousands of slaveholders in good standing in the M. E. Church. The M. E. Discipline tolerated slavery to the last."182

Closer to home the "Nazarenes" opposed the Masonic Order. The secret society was suspected of untold corruptions. The "Nazarenes" believed that powerful clergy and laymen were using their Masonic connections to undermine the integrity of the government of the Conference.

Along with these key issues and the cause of Christian perfection,
there was a rural-urban dimension to the hostility in western New York, with the "Nazarites" flourishing in small towns and languishing in Buffalo. There does not seem, however, to be any pre-existing class distinction among the ministers. "Nazarite" clergy often held prominent positions in the Conference. Men like Asa Abell, Loren Stiles, I. C. Kingsley, C. D. Burlingham, and Roberts himself were well educated and served variously as Presiding Elders, General Conference delegates, or pastors of large churches. Class distinctions among the clergy did not generate either the movement or its "Regency" opposition. Rather, it was their clash of ideas regarding the direction of the Church which drove them apart. By 1855, the controversy was very serious and very public. The succession of charges upon which Roberts and others were chastised and expelled were finally institutional ones. In the heat of debate, strong words were used on both sides and a natural polarization took place. Attacks on the institution were considered so serious that they were dealt with in basic ethical terms: Roberts was, at one point, declared guilty of "immoral and unchristian conduct." By 1860, the rift was complete and the Free Methodist Church was established.

Many of the leaders of the new church were casualties of the struggle. Stiles and Isaac Kingsley lost Presiding Elderships. William Hosmer's abolitionism cost him his position as editor of the Northern Christian Advocate (1856). Others like William Kendall were disciplined by the appointments they received. On the other hand, Roberts (and later Free Methodists) admitted the excesses in the "Nazarite" warfare. It could be said that their love for the old Methodist ways was too narrow and legalistic; that their zeal sometimes became Pharisaic. The emotions of the struggle, instead of demonstrating "perfect love," resembled those of any serious political contest.

But as the Genesee Conference (M. E. — the Free Methodists took the same name for their Conference in western New York) would one day publicly admit, its quashing of the "Nazarites" was unwise and overreactive. Ray Allen, in a message commemorating the centennial of the Conference (1910), lamented the treatment of "those expelled brethren," who "were among the best men the Conference contained, and scarce
anyone thought otherwise even then. The Conference held a special service during which their ministerial credentials were restored. The presentation was made to Professor Benson H. Roberts, son of B. T. Roberts, who then addressed the Conference with a frank but conciliatory message on behalf of Free Methodism. But even such a "service of dignity and sincere Christian fellowship" could not undo those fateful years. The division remains as testimony to the intensity and depth of its origins.

It is sometimes difficult to remember that the real life of the "Nazarites" was not in the arena of controversy, even though they fought in that arena vigorously. Spirituality, though often obscured by the ongoing battle, was their central concern. The spirituality of holiness was experienced in homes, rural churches, prayer meetings, and holiness camp meetings, such as the ones held in the Town of Bergen, New York, during the years of struggle, separation, and realignment. The Bergen Camp Meetings were occasions when the "Nazarite" people and their leaders met to experience and promote — even in the midst of strife — the gift of "perfect love." The story of the Bergen Camp Ground is the story in microcosm of the "Genesee conflict" and the even wider confrontation between those who wanted rigorously to maintain the old Methodist ways, and the Church whose life was changing with a developing America.

The site of the old camp ground is today a corn field. The land shows few of the characteristics that made it so suitable for the camp meetings that once filled the air with Methodist singing. The woods are gone, but the rural setting remains otherwise much the same: nearby farms, the same slight rolling of the landscape, an old cemetery, and scattered Greek Revival houses, including one that belonged to the Rev. Asa Abell, an organizer of the annual revivals.

Visitors' descriptions, together with the general information available on the design of camp grounds, enable us to reconstruct the setting in which these controversial meetings were held. Galusha Anderson, a University of Chicago professor who had grown up near the camp ground, later wrote that,

Within the bounds of the neighborhood was a beautiful primeval forest. There, in God's cathedral, whose pillars were the tall, straight trees, under the leafy arches of pendant limbs, the Methodists held in mid-summer their camp-meetings. In 1861, newspaper editor Horatio Beach rode out to the camp ground so that he could report to his Brockport readers what was happening there.

40Marston, From Age to Age, pp. 583ff.
41Ibid., p. 246.
After mentioning "the rich and varied agricultural scenery" along his route, he described "the near approach to the camp woods" which "was indicated by the rude signs of speculating farmers, who had 'board and lodgings' for men, and 'hay, oats, and stabling' for horses." Another account notes a particularly enterprising farmer who operated a stand near the entrance, where participants could purchase a variety of snacks, provisions, and pasturage (Appendix).

Beach told his readers that "the camp ground embraces an area of twenty-five acres, all covered by heavy timber, principally beach." Within the woods,

The center of the grounds were [sic] occupied by the tents, sixty-five in number, set... in a circle, inclosing the space devoted to holding of general meetings. In this center space is erected a preachers [sic] stand fronting on a large number of seats formed by laying planks across logs.

On several occasions, Beach's paper noted the commercial benefits accruing to Brockport area businesses and individuals from the huge influx of worshippers. In 1857 he said, "All our village omnibuses, hacks, gigs, wagons, and horses, were put in requisition" to "convey passengers to and from the grounds for Sabbath observances." In 1859, "Everything in the shape of horse flesh, on that day (Sunday), within a circle of fifteen miles of the camp ground, was pressed into service, the throngs going in the morning and returning in the evening forming almost a solid procession." All this transportation cost money — "double usual prices," said Beach in 1860. But it made the camp ground accessible to travellers by Erie Canal, which passed through Brockport, or New York Central Railroad, which stopped in the Village of Bergen. The size and fervor of the crowds that came prompted B. T. Roberts to say that "the Bergen Camp Meeting is the great Camp Meeting of Western New York." The "magnificent forest" was used as a camp ground from 1854 to 1872. Its history of ownership and control is tumultuous and confusing. After using Asa Abell's forest informally for two seasons, the "Nazarites," in the persons of B. T. Roberts and Loren Stiles, purchased it in 1856. In 1857, Roberts obtained from the state legislature a charter for a "Genesee Camp Ground Association," which would elect trustees

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44Ibid., June 19, 1857.  
45Ibid., June 30, 1859. The distance from Brockport to the camp ground was over eight miles.  
46Ibid., June 21, 1860.  
48Ibid., August 1862, p. 61.  
49Benson H. Roberts, *Biography*, pp. 94-7; *Minutes of the Western New York Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Buffalo), 1873 and 1874.  
and operate the ground "under the jurisdiction of the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church."51 While the camp ground was thus legally the responsibility of the Conference, and drew support from Conference officials and pastors, it was actually run by the Association as a holiness enterprise.

Soon, however, the expulsion and withdrawal of certain "Nazarite" leaders (who were also leaders at the camp meetings) rendered the matter of ownership and control problematic. The purchasers were no longer Methodists, and according to the charter, "none but members of the M. E. Church" could vote for trustees.52 So Roberts tried to have the now unwanted denominational references stricken,53 even as the M. E. Conference prepared to use those same references to gain control. In 1862, two years after the "Nazarites" formed the Free Methodist Church, the M. E. Conference held its own camp meeting on the contested ground. Its Standing Committee on Church Property resolved that a new group of official Methodist "Trustees of the Genesee Camp Ground Association be required to secure, protect, and defend the interest of the Genesee Conference against all persons whomsoever."

In that confrontation year (1862), both groups ran meetings at Bergen, and only three days apart! According to The Brockport Republic, "the attendance was rather light" for the M. E. assembly, but the "camp meeting under the auspices of the Nazarite Methodists" drew "a very large attendance."55 Clearly Bergen was a "Nazarite" camp ground that would not easily be taken. Even when the Methodist Episcopal leadership removed the Free Methodists and successfully held camp meetings there, those meetings lacked the spirit and purpose of the original leadership. They were in large part an attempt to show that loyal denominational people had replaced the fanatical, irresponsible fringe. Indeed, the "Nazarite" gathering in 1862 was to be "the last meeting held by our people on the old Bergen camp-ground."56 The Conference succeeded in defending the interest which it claimed "against all persons whomsoever" — meaning, of course, the renegade Free Methodists.

June of 1863 saw the Methodists holding their meeting in Bergen, with the Free Methodists moving to the fair grounds in Brockport. The Brockport meeting, described in advance by the local Methodist pastor as "being in the interest of the most loathsome and vulgar fanaticism that

51Zahnizer, Earnest Christian.
52Ibid.
54Minutes of the Genesee Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Brockport, 1862, p. 13.
55The Brockport Republic, June 12, 1862; June 26, 1862; June 5, 1862; June 18, 25, and July 2, 1863. It is important to note the impartial coverage of rival events. See also The Earnest Christian, August 1862, p. 62.
had ever disgraced western New York,” was well supported.⁵⁷ Again in 1864, the rival groups held their meetings back to back in the same two locations.⁵⁸ Genesee Conference Minutes (M. E.) indicate annual use of the old Bergen Camp Ground by its people through 1872. According to Roberts, that tenure was not uncontested:

Having thus gained possession, they threatened us with a law suit if we went on the ground to hold any meetings. We appointed no meetings for a few years, hoping to fairly settle the matter.

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To keep possession, they held sham camp-meetings for the election of trustees. At one time they had but one tent, — a canvass thrown over a pole. Preachers, from the stand, preached to an audience seated in the stand.

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We appointed a camp-meeting to be held there in June, 1867. They got out an injunction.

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The injunction was tried and we beat them. They then set men to work cutting wood on the camp-ground... 

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They beat us, of course.

It is scarcely necessary to add, after thus “improving” the ground, they ceased to hold camp meetings there, and very soon after sold the ground.⁵⁹

The M. E. camp meetings were, however, neither all sham nor all as tiny as Roberts indicates. F. W. Conable reported on the one held in 1865 “on the Bergen ground in August, as a grand success.”

The number of tents and general attendance; the excellent order prevailing; the direct, practical, and powerful preaching; the exhortations, having the genuine ring of other days; the spirit of earnest Christian labor manifested by both preachers and people; the presence and labors of Bishops Baker and Ames, with some fifty preachers of the Conference; and the happy results of the meeting in the quickening of the membership and the fresh anointing of the ministers for their work, rendered the meeting creditable to the Conference and to Methodism, and retrieved the time-honored and efficient means of grace “from the disgrace and odium which had been made to attach to it for many years, by its association with Nazaritical folly and fanaticism in the minds of our people.”⁶⁰

Trees or no trees and amid the lingering litigation, the Methodists went on holding meetings at Bergen through 1872. The struggle closed forever with

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⁵⁷The Earnest Christian, vol. 5, pp. 164, 191; July 1863, p. 32; see also The Brockport Republic, July 18, 1863.
⁵⁸The Brockport Republic, June 16 and 23, 1864.
⁶⁰Conable, Genesee Conference, p. 683.
a decision in 1873 to take the (M. E.) meetings to Silver Lake, New York, and a further decision in 1874 to make the change permanent.\textsuperscript{61}

The holiness speakers and organizers at Bergen represent a "who's who" of major actors in the Genesee conflict and the larger movement in upstate Methodism.\textsuperscript{62} Many came from outside the Genesee Conference; specifically from East Genesee, Oneida, Wyoming, Troy, and New York. One Lutheran minister is named (1859 and 1861) and preachers of other denominations likewise appear to have been there. The participation of Methodist clergy from outside the Conference was not seen as unusual or objectionable, at first, to those outside the "Nazarite" camp. But as the schism developed and the Bergen meetings became an obvious forum for the "Nazarite" cause, the Conference tried to cut off the immigration. In 1860 the Annual Conference sent a "fraternal communication" to neighboring Conferences, expressing the following resolution:

That we earnestly entreat brethren from abroad who come within the bounds of this Conference to assist in meetings, to lend their aid and encouragement only to such meetings as are under the pastoral care and oversight of the regular ministry.\textsuperscript{63}

Perhaps the best known of these visiting ministers was B. W. Gorham (Wyoming Conference), who preached often at Bergen, both before and after the schism and "fraternal communication." Author of The Camp Meeting Manual and editor of the Guide to Holiness, his participation links Bergen with the larger camp meeting tradition. Outsiders continued to come even when the "Nazarite" meetings were moved to Brockport.\textsuperscript{64}

Prominent among the Genesee preachers was Asa Abell, mentioned earlier. He was respected by, and felt a deep loyalty to, both parties in the conflict, making his separation from many of his old brethren (1861) a painful experience.\textsuperscript{65}

A leading figure in the holiness camp was B. T. Roberts, who became the first Bishop of the Free Methodist Church and edited its chief publication, The Earnest Christian. Roberts, who was at the very center of the trials and debate of the 1850's, later authored the standard apology for the separate existence of Free Methodism (Why Another Sect? 1879).

\textsuperscript{61}Minutes of the Western New York Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Buffalo, 1873, p. 11; 1874, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{62}The Brockport Republic, June 27, 1861; Conable, Genesee Conference, pp. 620, 683; Hart, Reminiscences, pp. 143-44; F. G. Hibbard, ed., Northern Christian Advocate (Auburn, NY), July 28, 1858; Minutes of the Genesee Annual Conference, 1865, p. 39; The Earnest Christian, July 1861, p. 226; B. T. Roberts, Why Another Sect? pp. 1, 119ff; Benson H. Roberts, Biography, pp. 95-97, 221; Terrill, Redfield, p. 294. In spite of the expanding role of women in holiness circles, all the Bergen preachers listed in these references were men.
\textsuperscript{63}Conable, Genesee Conference, p. 654.
\textsuperscript{64}The Brockport Republic, June 18, 1863.
\textsuperscript{65}The Earnest Christian, March, 1861, p. 98; Conable, Genesee Conference, p. 691; James Arnold Reinhard, Personal and Sociological Factors in the Formation of the Free Methodist Church, 1852-1860, dissertation, University of Iowa, 1971, pp. 178ff.
Regarded as contumacious by his adversaries, he nevertheless impressed a somewhat sceptical Oneida Conference visitor, the Rev. J. F. Crawford, with his ability to transcend the conflict as he preached at Bergen in 1859:

What was remarkable in this sermon, the speaker did not as much as refer to his troubles, but the sweetest and most heavenly spirit seemed to reign through the whole discourse. If he continues to maintain the spirit he now possesses, his foes must all fall powerless at his feet.  

Needless to say, his foes had a different impression and response.

Loren Stiles had been appointed Genesee District Presiding Elder early in the struggle, in order to keep things under control there. Much to the chagrin of many, he soon joined the “Nazarites” and helped launch the Bergen Camp Meetings. Ousted from his Albion, New York pulpit in 1860, Stiles and many supporters established a Free Methodist church directly across the street.

The mere existence of such vast meetings, supported by so many clergy, posed a challenge to a church which was slowly moving away from the kind of religion Bergen represented. Later efforts to compete with and supercede the “Nazarites” on their own ground demonstrate the symbolic importance of what went on there. Finally the camp ground at Bergen became synonymous with controversy and unworkable as an official institution. After some “defoliation,” the Conference sold the ground and relocated its modest meetings. Perhaps Silver Lake could provide a new start, away from a setting that could never be free of its original associations.

Conable and conference minutes provide a picture of the M. E. leadership at Bergen from 1862 to 1872. The outstanding camp meeting of 1865 was conducted by two Bishops (Ames and Baker) and around fifty Conference preachers. But as years went on, attendance dwindled; leadership came from the Presiding Elder and any clergy who would come. No mention is made, beyond the bishops in 1865, of ministers travelling from outside the Conference to join in these efforts. Indeed, it was sometimes difficult to get a full contingent of Conference men to participate.

While it is doubtful that an accurate account was ever made of those attending on a given day or week, the estimates are, especially for Sabbaths, quite staggering in an era when the camp meeting generally had “passed its prime.” Roberts called the first meeting (1854) “the largest and one of the very best I ever attended.” Conable’s account of the 1855 gathering is also imprecise, but he remembered “thousands attending.”

The Rev. B. I. Ives (Oneida Conference) reported the 1858 session as

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The Bergen Camp Meeting

by far the largest that I have ever attended, and is said to have been the largest and best that has ever been held in Western New York. There were a hundred and four cloth tents, and many of them were very large, and all of them appeared to be well filled. The congregations were large and very attentive all through the meeting. On the Sabbath there must have been at least, [sic] five thousand people present. . . .

The awesome sight of five thousand worshippers in the woods for the Sabbath was only the beginning. In 1859, J. F. Crawford reported "probably 12,000 people on the ground" on Sunday morning, behaving with "perfect order." Nor did he exaggerate the size of that congregation: That same year, The Brockport Republic reported estimates of "from 12,000 to 15,000 — the larger number probably being nearest the mark."

The crowds gathered again in 1860, a tumultuous year for church and nation:

On the Sabbath the attendance was very large. It would seem as if the whole of the densely populated country, with its thriving villages for twenty miles around, turned out en masse. There were probably ten thousand persons on the ground.

The 1861 and 1862 gatherings were also crowded, though less spectacular than the previous two years, and 1862 brought the final celebration for the "Nazarites" at Bergen. Roberts declared, looking back over those nine years: "The Bergen Camp Meeting is the great Camp Meeting of Western New York." He had good reason for saying so.

The Bergen accounts also give us some idea where all these people came from. B. T. Roberts said of one meeting that "It would seem as if the whole of the densely populated country, with its thriving villages for twenty miles around, turned out en masse." Horatio Beach was more specific, listing thirteen nearby villages as sending wagons and erecting tents for the meetings. A good number of those attending, then, were from the general region as the camp ground. But William Reddy also mentioned the presence of "old Methodists from Boston and from Connecticut" at the 1858 meeting. And Roberts noted that in 1861,

People came from all parts of the country. The extravagant misrepresentations that some professedly religious papers published of the meeting last year led some to come from the city of New York and New England to see and hear for themselves.

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71Ibid., p. 124.
72The Brockport Republic, June 30, 1859.
73The Earnest Christian, August 1860; The Brockport Republic, June 28, 1860, reported a similar number.
74The Brockport Republic, June 27, 1861; The Earnest Christian, August 1862.
75The Earnest Christian, August 1862. There were other camp grounds at Pekin, Rushford, Allegany, and Collins, all within the Genesee Conference.
76The Earnest Christian, August 1860, p. 255.
77The Brockport Republic, June 19, 1857; June 27, 1861.
They came from nearby villages and distant cities, but also from the immediate rural community. Galusah Anderson recalled that

Most of the people in the neighborhood, without respect to creed, attended them. Denominational walls for the time being were broken down. Christians of different names preached and prayed together, and the forest rang with their songs of praise.\(^8^5\)

Although the holiness movement was both Methodist and trans-denominational, most of the accounts of these meetings focus on their Methodism. Indeed, the struggle for control of the camp ground was a struggle among Methodists who could not even keep their own church from fracturing. Yet it is also true that Roberts, Gorham, and others were related ideologically to the larger holiness movement. *The Earnest Christian*, begun by Roberts in 1860, carried articles by authors from a variety of denominations. And here, Anderson tells us that the Methodists were not alone at the Bergen Camp Ground. Still, even with this diversity of geographic and denominational origin, it remains likely that most of the participants were Methodists (and Free Methodists) from nearby communities.

Were the people exclusively holiness evangelicals, or did “sinners” also attend? The reports are not complete, but they do not leave us helpless. Albion, for example, was responsible for two of the tents Horatio Beach found on the ground in 1861; it was also a “Nazarite” stronghold.\(^8^1\) The Albion contingent certainly included many who were convinced evangelicals and holiness people; in this they must have been typical. We also read, in a letter from B. T. Roberts to his father (1854), that “there were a goodly number of conversions. . . .” He adds, however, that “the greatest work was in the church. Formalists were aroused, backsliders reclaimed and believers sanctified.”\(^8^2\) His comment indicates the distinctions made by the camp ground leadership between various kinds of people and degrees of spiritual transformation. There continued to be a group of converts distinct from those who were reclaimed as backsliders or taken forward into holiness.\(^8^3\) Doubtless some came from families of uneven spirituality. Some may have been spectators, or even local “rowdies.”

The presence of “rowdies” is not mentioned by the leaders of these meetings, perhaps because they wanted to minimize anything that might provoke charges of disorder. But in 1859, *The Brockport Republic* pleaded with those who might ride out on Sunday for reasons not particularly spiritual:

\(^8^4\)Anderson, *Neighbors*, p. 106.
\(^8^1\)B. T. Roberts, William Kendall, and Loren Stiles each pastored the Albion M. E. Church during the period. Albion was also the site of three “Laymen’s Conventions.” See Marston, *From Age to Age*.
\(^8^2\)Benson H. Roberts, *Biography*, p. 96.
Those who attend on the Sabbath to gratify curiosity should remember that it is not the 4th of July, and preserve that order and decorum due to the day, and to those who desire to observe it in keeping with their views of its sacredness.  

Mrs. Greenaker (Appendix) said that she had "reason to think boys were boys those days as well as now" and that some "disorderly visitor[s]" had to be placed in a sort of camp jail. William Sands, present owner of the site, reported to me that when his ancestor bought and cultivated the land, he uncovered a considerable quantity of old liquor bottles. Of course, none of this was foreign to the camp meeting tradition. Nor is it unexpected in view of the size of the crowds. It would be strange if everyone came with the purest of motives.

None of these groups of detractors disturbed B. T. Roberts as much as the one he mentioned in 1860:

Almost the only instances of a wilful departure from becoming decorum that have come to our knowledge, have been, we are sorry to say, among those Methodist ministers, whose object in attending, seems to be to obtain material which will enable a wild imagination by misrepresentation, exaggeration, and false coloring, to so mould over and paint, as to throw contempt upon the whole proceedings.

So a variety of people came to the camp ground for a variety of reasons. In such a setting, under such powerful emotions as camp meetings produced, some went away converted.

One further dimension of camp meeting participation is seen in the "Laymen's Conventions" which accompanied the split in the Conference. One of these was held at the camp ground in 1859. The summons to this meeting indicates something of the feeling of being a "Nazarite," as well as the political side of these meetings: "Important issues are at stake; we feel the iron heel of oppression heavily laid upon us as laymen. We feel unwilling to become the slaves of any power."

It had its political side, and it resulted in some conversions each year, but "the leading object of this camp-meeting was the promotion of entire holiness in the Church." The Divine purpose in these events was "not only to forgive, but also to cleanse from all unrighteousness." They were designed to deliver or deepen the holiness experience in the lives of those who came, and to disseminate that same experience when they went home. If preachers could be sanctified and sent out as missionaries of the old Wesleyan faith, so much the better: "Some of the ministers also felt anew the life-giving power of the Holy Ghost, and went out to scatter more than ever the holy fire."

The camp meeting was also a great social and religious extravaganza,
so large that rural neighbors and surrounding villages had to take notice, even if they did not actually come. It was a week out of every year when people could take a religious vacation, return to their spiritual roots, fellowship with those who shared their commitments, and serve their God by praying, preaching, or giving testimony to the central reality of their lives.

They celebrated their identity, which was evangelical, holiness, and for most, Methodist. People came to be saved, to be revived, to be cleansed of a sinful nature, and to relive and preserve primitive Wesleyan piety. The daily routine of camp meetings generally has been discussed by Dickson Bruce and is reflected in circuit rider autobiographies and in The Camp Meeting Manual. The Bergen accounts confirm and extend these sources.

The preaching was direct and forceful, aimed at making concrete, visible, and permanent changes in the lives of listeners.

The preaching was in demonstration of the Spirit and in power. There was no attempt at display, no historical or philosophical essays were read, no studied declamation upon the greatness and power of the Church, but point-blank shots were sent from the stand day after day, to the hearts and consciences of the hearers.

The crucial ingredient which the camp meeting method was designed to accommodate was “the power of God.” The atmosphere was so electrified that even when strangers came upon the ground, they were led to say, as several brethren in the ministry and others did to me, “God is here. There is power here; there appears to be a stream of holy fire and power encircling this camp-ground.” And so it was. There appeared to rest upon all, as they came within the circle of tents, a holy impression that God was there in awful power, to awaken, convert, purify, and save souls.

We also read of prayer and even class meetings in the tents, indicating the use of smaller groups to supplement the larger services. In 1859, J. F. Crawford described the Sunday schedule at Bergen. Crawford himself spoke early that morning, followed by John Wesley Redfield at 10 o’clock, whereupon “there were prayer circles formed all over the ground, and the power of God was greatly manifested among the people.” At 2 o’clock B. I. Ives preached, with A. B. Gregg and C. D. Brooks holding forth in the evening. No doubt there were planned and spontaneous prayer meetings scattered in the interstices and into the night.

Did all of this amount to fanaticism, or old-fashioned Methodism? According to Roberts, “The Bergen Camp Meeting was considered by our opposers the most objectionable of all our meetings. Some of them called it the “hot bed of fanaticism.” Conable called 1855 “a great meeting,” but later agreed with one who said:

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80Bruce, Halleluia, pp. 61ff.
81The Earnest Christian, August 1860, p. 255.
82Ibid., p. 120.
84Ibid., p. 118.
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we have neither time nor disposition to spread out ... a description of what has been seen at Nazarite Quarterly and camp meetings. Scenes have often occurred which have been a disgrace to a civilized community, to say nothing of a pure religion.96

Galusha Anderson recalled that the meetings were sometimes characterized by

the wildest extravagances. Men and women prayed at the top of their voices, and, as the excitement rose, a score at a time would pray, and each would utter his petitions with the full capacity of his lungs, — and that capacity seemed marvelously great, — until bedlam itself seemed to have broken loose. Sometimes persons fell to the ground, became pale and rigid, and were oblivious to all that was passing around them. Hours sometimes elapsed before they awoke to consciousness.

At these meetings much of the preaching was good, many of the exhortations were sensible and weighty, but mingled with these were talks that were strange and grotesque.96

In 1870, the M. E. Conference happily received a report that the Bergen Camp Ground had “more than recovered from the influence of the disturbing elements of a few years past. . . .”97

Three reasons underlie this reaction. First, outsiders may not have been familiar or comfortable with practices long associated with camp meetings and not unique to Bergen. Much of what they relate is too common to require special explanation, except for those outside the camp meeting tradition.

Secondly, many Methodists who objected were not so much criticizing Bergen as they were rejecting their own background. For if it was plain to some that these meetings were outrageous and undignified, it was equally plain to others that they were genuinely Methodist. William Reddy heard older participants say, “with streaming eyes and bounding hearts, ‘this is as it used to be forty years ago.’”98 B. I. Ives heard similar remarks: “This reminds me of the early days of Methodism in this country. This is such a campmeeting as we used to have. . . .”99 And again, Roberts heard visitors say, “This is old fashioned Methodism. This is what we used to see years ago, and what we still believe in.”100 Bergen was not unusual. After ousting the Free Methodists from the ground, the M. E. Conference conducted its own meetings, which were not so very different. While the sponsors tried very hard to dissociate them from their “Nazaritical” past, they acknowledged their continuity with the larger camp meeting tradition. They said that the 1865 meeting had “the genuine Methodist ring of other days,” and they identified it both with earlier

96Conable, Genesee Conference, pp. 620, 637.
97Anderson, Neighbors, p. 106; see also Reinhard, dissertation, pp. 45ff on charges and denials of alleged extravagance; The Brockport Republic, June 27, 1861.
98Western New York Conference Minutes, 1870, p. 25.
100“Ibid., pp. 121-22.
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evangelism — "in which Methodism had its rise" — and continued usefulness. ¹⁰¹

We are forced to accept an explanation for the conflict which ultimately rests in the interaction of the parties involved, and the social changes with which they were trying to come to terms. The style of the two series of meetings probably varied, along with the topics of conversation and the content of the preaching. The theology of entire sanctification probably played a less prominent role after the "Nazarites" left. But there was, in addition, that party rivalry that has sometimes been fierce among Methodist preachers, especially when the institution is under fire. ¹⁰²

The Bergen Camp Ground was part of the orthodox camp meeting tradition, reasserted with vigor and party spirit in the midst of a struggle over religious identity in a changing world. Its history provides a window to a generation responding in different ways to immense socio-economic pressures, as well as a key to some of the significant controversies of our own time.

Appendix: Greenaker Manuscript

William Sands, present owner of most of the Bergen Camp Ground site, has in his possession a manuscript by Mrs. George Greenaker, an amateur local historian. It is largely composed of information she received from Charles Reed, who had lived near the ground. Reed, a state assemblyman in 1892 and 1893, was 85 years old when he shared these recollections during the early part of this century. According to Mrs. Greenaker, "Mr. Reed's memory is as cleare [sic] as a school boy," for he was "well preserved for his years." Since errors in grammar are common to the manuscript, I will relay it exactly as written, without the usual "sic":

In 1857 [the date here should be 1856] Asa Abel sold 25 acre of a wood lot on the S. W. Corner by the red school house now owned by John Sand to the trustee of the Genesee Camp Association to be used exclusively as a camp ground for the purpose of holding religious meetings under the jurisdiction of the Genesee Annual Conference of the M. E. Church. Camp Meeting were held there every year or until the division of the M. E. Church and Free Methodist since looking up this history I find a great many that attended camp meeting there. + have reason to think boys were boys those days as well as now. I have been told by those living a mile away they sat out on there porches at night + could hear the singing + shouting preaching as plain as if there. + one Sunday Mr. Reed said when he was there it was estimated there were 2500 people there. teams + horses were hitched a ½ mile the 4 directions + in the Wm. Elmore orchard now owned by C E Warren poles were placed between the trees + they were hitched up + down the rows + Mr. Elmore had a stand on the school near the entrance where they sold popcorn oranges, ice cream miscellaneous things of want, also

¹⁰¹Genesee Conference Minutes, 1865, p. 40.
¹⁰²See statements by Luther Lee on the attitudes of Methodists toward abolitionists and schismatics in the Wesleyan Methodist context: Orange Scott, Grounds of Secession from the M. E. Church (New York, 1843; reprint 1969).
accomodated those wishing to put their horses out, turned his farm into a livery for good pay, horse drawn stages were run from LeRoy, Brockport + Holley Clarendon and all surrounding villages to the Campground. the large plat-form was covered by a tabernacle + where services were held. ——— 12 years, when in July 3 — 1874 the Trustee Genesee Campground association sold the 25 acre to James E. Bilk. by authority of a petition asking the supreme court for an order to sell same.