On July 31, 1875, when the Reverend Elwood H. Stokes reflected on the religious retreat he and others had created at Ocean Grove, New Jersey, he waxed philosophical. "This place is not an accident," he began. "Far back in the history of the past, indeed, from the beginning, rest from the wear and tear of human life has been a necessity. Human nature, in its mental and physical conditions, cannot endure uninterrupted toil," he continued. "In the earlier ages life was simpler, and the habits of men such as to afford somewhat of the needed rest in the rural pursuits furnished from day to day." But in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Stokes recognized, conditions had changed, and as "a higher type of civilization prevailed, brain and nerve were taxed to the last extreme by these refinements, until the physical was almost prostrated, and the mind imperiled."1

The industrial revolution and the concomitant urbanization of the late nineteenth century had spawned summer resorts at places like Lake George and the Catskill Mountains in New York and Long Branch and Cape May in New Jersey. Religious people too, Stokes acknowledged, "worn down with the toils of professional and business life," sought respite, "and they said, one to another, 'We want to enjoy the sea, and the air, and the bathing and the fishing—the sea and the air are God's works, and for us—and we need them. Can we not have them, free from the dissipations and follies of fashionable watering places, and at a cost within our means?'"2

The answer to this rhetorical question was yes. Religious resorts flourished at Martha's Vineyard, Saratoga Springs, and elsewhere.3 In 1867 Methodists and others devoted to the doctrine of entire sanctification—the belief that a "second blessing" of the Holy Spirit rendered the believer free from sin—organized the National Association for the Promotion of Holiness in Vineland, New Jersey. From that gathering various local

1 Address by Ellwood H. Stokes, July 31, 1875, transcript provided by Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, Ocean Grove, N.J.
2 Ibid.
3 The formation of new camp meetings continued past the turn of the century; see, for example, Clyde W. Lord, "The Mineral Springs Holiness Camp Meeting," Louisiana History, XVI (1975), 257-277.
holiness associations evolved, and one group, led by William B. Osborn, sought a location along the Jersey shore. Vineland, in South Jersey, had offered no shade, and the mosquitoes drove the prospectors from Cape May. Osborn finally decided on eleven shorefront acres in what is now Ocean Grove, purchased for the sum of fifty dollars.4

Over the next three decades the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association, formed in December 1869, developed their tract along the sea into a religious resort that still stands. "A few of us proposed, in the simplest way," Stokes recalled, "to assemble from year to year, and enjoy our summer rest in bathing, fishing, worshipping or sauntering socially along the shore, free from the heavy cares which we felt resting upon us, welcoming from the immediate neighborhood such as might choose to join us in our simple service by the Sea."5 But while Stokes and his confreres at Ocean Grove fashioned a retreat for the workers of the industrialized city in the late nineteenth century, they also institutionalized the revival techniques of the early nineteenth century.

No phenomenon defined nineteenth-century religious experience as much as the camp meeting, which first took root in the Cumberland Valley. James McGready, a Presbyterian, assembled his congregants and their neighbors along Kentucky’s Gasper River for several days in July 1800. The promise of revival spread so quickly that the next year a crowd estimated at ten to twenty-five thousand gathered at Cane Ridge for a week of singing, exhortation by various preachers, conversions, and baptism. 6 A religious frenzy convulsed many of the participants.6 Presbyterians back east soon grew chary of camp-meeting revivals and their emotional excesses, but the practice continued among Cumberland Presbyterians and in Methodist circles throughout the ante-bellum period. By mid-century a general pattern and structure had emerged, and the Reverend B. W. Gorham of upstate New York even published a Camp Meeting Manual in 1854, a guide for the organization and execution of successful revivals.7

Antebellum camp meetings generally began on a Thursday evening, and each day thereafter was highly structured. At 5:00 the next morning a trumpet blast awakened the participants encamped around the meeting-place, calling them to a time of family prayer in each tent. Another trumpet

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5Stokes’s address, July 31, 1875.
7Gorham, Camp Meeting Manual: A Practical Book for the Camp Ground; In Two Parts (Boston, 1854).
summoned everyone to the pulpit for morning prayer. After breakfast, a third trumpet signalled the morning service, a meeting of prayer, sermons, exhortations, an invitation to conversion, and, around eleven o’clock, the principal sermon. After lunch, the afternoon gathering resembled the morning meeting, except that it lacked a principal sermon. Between the afternoon and evening services, the clergy consulted with small groups of laity. After supper, the trumpet’s blare signalled the evening service, which lasted long into the night. Several days of this regimen frequently climaxed in an evening service that lasted through the night. A love-feast, usually on Monday, closed the camp meeting, and the participants dispersed to their farms and settlements.8

For the vacationers at Ocean Grove in the second half of the century, the daily routine was more precise and regularized, but no less demanding. According to the Asbury Park (NJ) Daily Press in 1887, the day at Ocean Grove began at 5:45 with an hour-long meeting in the tabernacle, followed by a short time of family devotions. A holiness meeting started at 9:00, followed by plenary sessions in the auditorium at 10:30 and again at 3:00, gatherings separated by lunch and an early-afternoon Bible study. The participants later divided into various instructional and training groups. At 6:30 a twilight service led directly into the evening meeting at 7:30, which lasted several hours. Ten days of this schedule comprised the camp meeting at Ocean Grove, which culminated in the love-feast, held on Sunday morning to allow vacationers time to return to their work on Monday morning.9

The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association routinized and institutionalized the frontier camp meeting in other ways. Whereas singing in antebellum revivals had relied on the oral tradition and improvised melodies, the Association published its own songbook in 1902, which juxtaposed the works of Fanny Crosby, Isaac Watts, and Charles Wesley with those of such lesser-known muses as Joseph Hart, Lucy Evelyn Akerman, and Ada Blenkhorn. Camp-meeting officials also installed a great pipe organ after the turn of the century, a contrast to the primitive accompaniment and haphazard meter of frontier gatherings a hundred years earlier.10

The physical dimensions of Ocean Grove, however, provide the most striking example of the camp meeting as institution.11 A visitor to modern-
day Ocean Grove encounters such landmarks as Wesley Lake, Beersheba Well, and streets with appellations like Pilgrim Pathway or Whitefield, named after the eighteenth-century revivalist. More important, however, the layout of the grounds bespeaks the influence of frontier revivalism. Ocean Grove derived its name from the oak and pine trees which the founders carefully pruned, thereby evoking the same kind of “cathedral in the wilderness” that the frontier revivalists had created.12 A colony of semi-permanent tents borders the central buildings on two sides (see photo 1 on cover), reminiscent of the tents that surrounded the gathering place in antebellum camp meetings.

The centerpiece of Ocean Grove, the Great Auditorium, built in 1894, resembles nothing more than a huge, permanent tent or hippodrome (photo 2). Constructed of wood supported by iron trusses, it replaced a succession of open-air structures, although the new building stopped short of

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full enclosure; huge doors on both the ground floor and the balcony provided inexpensive ventilation and a continuity with the past (photo 3). Although the design of New York architect Fred T. Camp gave a passing nod to the Gothic revival then in vogue—discernible in some of the exterior detailing (see photo 4) and in the stick-style entrances (photo 3)—
the building itself is spare and functional, in keeping with Methodist tradition. Its very scale (225 by 161 feet on the ground floor, with total seating approaching one thousand) testifies both to the phenomenal success of Ocean Grove and to the desire on the part of its leaders to lend a sense of permanence to their resort and its religious functions.13

The impulse to institutionalize the camp meeting in Ocean Grove paralleled broader trends within Methodism itself. By the middle of the nineteenth century Methodists had become the largest Protestant group

13Brewer, Perspectives on Ocean Grove, 20.
in America and were eager to shed their image as an insurgent denomina­tion confined predominantly to the frontier. As Methodists entered the mainstream of American religious life and their social and economic aspirations rose, the accouterments of their worship also changed.

Ocean Grove, with its institutionalization of earlier customs, reflected both these internal changes within Methodism and the external cultural transformations played out over the course of the nineteenth century. Both the ante- and the postbellum camp meetings sought locations near water, but with one important difference: The earlier revivals took place near freshwater for sustenance, while the founders of Ocean Grove gravitated toward the sea for recreation and relaxation. Furthermore, whereas the antebellum revivals meant to tame the rowdy frontier, convert the unsaved, and thereby create new church members, the Victorian camp meeting focused on those already churched and called them to a life of holiness. Even the timing of camp meetings reflected sociological changes. The season for frontier revivals extended from July to October, but they occurred most often late in September in order to accommodate the demands of the harvest. The Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association catered to different needs, those of the urban, industrial worker, so its late-August camp meeting coincided with the end of the vacation season.

For many a Victorian Methodist, Ocean Grove doubtless fulfilled Elwood Stokes' vision of a retreat from industrialism, "free from the dissipations and follies of fashionable watering places." Its seaside venue provided refreshment for mind and body, while its religious programs offered nourishment for the soul. With its regularized meetings and its permanent structures, Ocean Grove succeeded on yet another front—that of translating a frontier phenomenon, the camp meeting, into a Methodist institution. By the latter part of the nineteenth century the same techniques that had made Methodists of the rowdy settlers in the Cumberland Valley now served to refresh the wearied workers of the industrial city. At Ocean Grove many of them found, in the words of Fanny Crosby's hymn in the Ocean Grove songbook, "Rest, sweet rest, hallowed rest, Song for the toil-worn ev'rywhere, Rest, sweet rest."