practical matters

A Trip to the Spring: A Film

D. S. Mote

Since 1830, families have gathered almost every year at Shingleroof Campground in Henry County, Georgia to keep camp meeting together. Shingleroof, like other extant camp meetings across the US, is the offspring of the Great Revival that began on the Kentucky frontier at the turn of the 19th century and swept across the South over the next few decades.

Characterized by stomping, shouting, and being slain in the Spirit, the early camp meetings were deemed overly emotional and unnecessarily demonstrative by the establishment Presbyterians and Baptists on the frontier. The meetings were taken up fairly quickly by Methodist circuit riders who established annual camp meetings at hundreds of preaching points across the South. Shingleroof stands in the stream of this Methodist heritage, while being interdenominational in spirit and practice since its founding.

Some 30 to 40 camp meetings in a variety of Protestant evangelical traditions, including Methodist, Presbyterian, and Holiness, continue in Georgia in the early twenty-first century; a dozen, including Shingleroof, are within a 25-mile radius of downtown Atlanta. Today participants in the remaining camp meetings are less given to fits of spiritual ecstasy during daily worship services and more focused on the resonant power of being part of a living tradition that has endured for two centuries.

Camp meeting at Shingleroof is a willing re-creation by twenty-first-century people of certain nineteenth-century conditions of hardship. Participants who, almost to a person, own or have access to the latest electronics and technology—from wi-fi to gaming systems to air conditioning—freely leave these at home in order to return to and reconnect with older ways of being and doing. In gathering where their forebears did and worshipping in ways consistent with how their ancestors worshipped, camp meeting participants—and camp meeting practices—are revived in

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multiple modes and on multiple levels simultaneously.

My own family has participated in camp meetings at Shingleroof for nine generations. We count the camp meeting week as being among our high holy days as a clan. In a time and a place set apart, we join hundreds of other Shingleroof attenders in a weeklong "commemorative ceremony," in Paul Connerton's term,[1] comprised of dozens of smaller, family-specific ceremonies. In these ceremonies, both more and less formal, participants indeed commemorate, that is, remember together, old ways and old days, actively invoking names and narratives of ancestors as they do so. All of these practices, which include *timeways*, *foodways*, *speechways*, using antique implements, reciting genealogy, public and private acts of Christian worship, and lots of storytelling, connect the present camp meeting moment with the moments and people who have gone before. As the Shingleroof tradition approaches the two hundred-year mark, we can rightly understand it not only as a living tradition of frontier revivalism but also as an instantiation of filial piety on US soil.

Shingleroof Campground is comprised of some forty cabins, known as tents, laid out in a square around a two-tiered, open-air tabernacle where twice-daily worship services are held during the week of camp meeting. Just off the square, on the northeast corner of the campground, are the so-called "big" and "little" springs that together supplied all the campground's water until the 1980s. Even in times of severe drought, the big spring has never run dry, neither in Shingleroof lore nor in living memory. Going to the spring is one of the ritual, commemorative events of camp meeting.

The film published here, "A Trip to the Spring*,"* is a short documentary using the mode of observational cinema.[2] It depicts a visit to the big spring on the first day of camp meeting in July 2009 by members of four generations of one family. This piece is one in a series of seven short films that comprise the visual chapter of my doctoral dissertation, *Ancestors in the Laying-By Time: Revival of the Living and the Dead at Shingleroof Camp Meeting*.

The film provokes a number of questions with respect to this issue's focus on ethnography and theology. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

What are the theological implications of the activities the group carries out at the spring?

Are the members of this four-generation group involved in doing practical theology? If so, in what ways?

Is there evidence in the film to support the statement, "Camp meeting makes a camp meeting body"?

What are the signs of continuity across generations depicted in the film? Which are verbal/narrative? Which are situated in practices? Which are both?

Does this trip to the spring constitute a commemorative ceremony? If so, in what ways?

If we understand theology to be "critique from within a tradition," what, if any, critiques are depicted here?

How do multiple christenings and baptisms fit into the traditions of evangelical Protestantism?

Can a liturgy of visiting the spring be discerned here?

Notes

1 Connerton, Paul, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

2 For more about observational cinema, see http://www.practicalmattersjournal.org/issue/1/centerpieces/making-a-mandala and http://www.dsmote.net/A_Miyoshi_Obon/About_Observational_Cinema.html.