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Big Meeting

At a recent gathering where tall-tales were being spun, a robust country woman began reminising out loud, nostalgia welling in her pure gray eyes. She narrated in economical southern dialect how her husband and neighbor labored all night in the mid-fifties to "get the car running" for the long pilgrimage to Big Meeting in Macon. While the women busied about the kitchen, rolling thin egg dumplings, the men tinkered beneath the hood of their anemic Plymouth. And by dawn they were able to jump-start it with child-energy, pushing it along the dun dirt road. Covered dishes and bright long-faced children were stacked on a seat contrived of apple crates in the rear. Then they puttered north, like immigrant fruit pickers, misdirected.

Not the tale, but the expression of nostalgia, prompted me to ponder the Big Meetings. What is Big Meeting? Why do the Primitive Baptists exert so much energy to attend? What is the appeal?

Big Meeting is a religious and social revival wrung from the love, tedium and toil of God-fearing families who still grace the south. But in the mid-fifties, the fervency and festivities of Big Meetings were irresistable for the yeoman class of Primitive Baptists, as well as other raw rural entrepreneurs.

The event marks the annual association of the district Primitive Baptist churches, during the first week in September.

Thursday marshals in a somber business meeting: Elders, deacons and congregation pouring over doctrine and details. Friday is much of the same, cranking up with sample preaching and preacher feeds. Saturday heralds the festivities with a preliminary dinner-on-the-ground, a sort of run-on smorgasboard extending to Sunday when the big feast and preaching draws the biggest crowd, young and old and inbetween from all over.

Though Thursday through Sunday calendars the big event, they don't begin there. They begin a month ahead in feverish preparation, sweeping down year-old cob webs from the ceilings of their generational farm houses, airing out and sprucing up, beheading the best chicken on the yard for the stew pot. Going on to the austere church, set back in the woods - Wayfare, in Echols County, for example - they dust the hard pine pews, polish the Bible-sanded podium, and wax the plank floors to a sharp shine.

Outside, they rake the scantily grassed yard, the hollow strikes of the rakes falling on the deep pine woods where the locusts hum. Knowing no boundaries in their preparations, they rake on into the white sand cemetary, replacing dead flowers with fresh. Century-old tombstones lean and blaze in the hot August sun, grassy green mold blurring elaborate epitaths.

By the first Thursday in September - excitement cresting on the wane of their labor - crude stalls flank the dirt lane from the highway to the church. Beneath canopies erected of tobacco sheeting, hawkers, in deferential tones, bargain with

the scattered congregation, picking up to a throng by Sunday. Two-by-fours, supported by saw horses, make-do as stands for lemonade, snow cones, boiled peanuts, popcorn, pear tarts, home-brew cola, homemade candy and Kool-aid. Kool-aid is the big temptation, having just made a big splash on the country-store market.

The cars, big power-glide, automatic Chevys, likewise lure the alternating preachers, sweating out the gospel through their pores, to pause and peer out the wavy glass windows, as they swerve to the front of the concrete block church.

The boys in starched and ironed khakis, too squirmy and too tempted by the Kool-aid and the big cars, gather outside, squinting into the white morning sun. It is only ten A.M. - the preaching will go on till three P.M. Inside, they're singing "Amazing Grace," high and nasal, a capello. But the boys have hidden cane fishing poles in the reeds and willows along the banks of Cow Creek, where currents of umber water travel beneath a rustic bridge. When they tire of the cars, they strike out.

The mid-fifties boast a rural economic surge, but only relatively. And the big cars, like the big meetings, are a big attraction. A dozen or so swaggering farmers on a big haul sport about in blue serge suits.

Dinner-on-the-ground is big, too. Under the dapple shade of turkey oaks, a rough wood frame creates a long table,

covered with a lace of octagonal chicken wire, soon sagging with a spread of rich food: fried chicken, chicken and dumplings, chicken and cornbread dressing, sausage and backyard smoked ham. Vegetables, fresh and put-up, lend colors of green, orange, and yellow from a hub of somebody's platter of fresh, sliced tomatoes, salvaged from a coddled plant. Desserts on one end: jelly rolls, egg custards, and everybody's favorite chocolate layer cake, thin layers glazed with a dark cooked icing. The banana pudding's meringue is as light and frothy as the clouds in the cerulean sky.

They pray it doesn't rain. But should it rain, they'll all converge on the nearest spacious farm house, shuffling in with soggy food, tented with waxed paper, the green scent of rain all around.

Sound dull? No. Neither is it irrevenent, just an occasion for some big socializing mixed with a lamming dose of old-time religion.