

RELIGION IN ZALESKI

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My memories of all things religious in Zaleski are especially vivid, since my Mother attended every religious function of all the protestant churches, and Christmas Eve Midnight Mass at the Catholic Church. I was her very frequent, and very reluctant, companion on these trips.

There were four churches in Zaleski, population 380. A Methodist church, where we were members; a Baptist, a Nazarene, and the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church was the largest—about half the population of Zaleski was Catholic. The Methodist Church was the largest Protestant church. Then the Baptist, and finally, the Nazarene. Surrounding Zaleski, at a distance of 3 to 6 miles, were several other small churches in tiny farming communities. They were no longer having regular Sunday services, but would sometimes house "Tent Evangelists", which were traveling tent revivalists. These individuals operated somewhat like a circus, in that two or three weeks in advance, a person would come to town and put up posters announcing the dates and times of services, and information about the minister. On opening day, there would be a parade of people who would go house-to-house, announcing the revival and inviting attendance.

Since these meetings were frequently held in tents, they were usually in the summer. Likewise, the Baptists, who did not have a Baptistery in their little church, did a mass Baptism in

Raccoon Creek each summer. This was a memorable event, especially for the citizens who spent the day loafing on the steps of the storefront next to the Post office. The Baptists always chose a summer weekday, about 11 AM. This time meant that the postmaster had sorted the mail and filled the boxes. Many people were downtown, and the Baptists knew that many would be irresistibly drawn to the ceremony.

The entire Baptist church membership would appear in front of the Town Hall, singing, "Shall We Gather at the River". There would be 50 members, plus 20 in thin white gowns, which were to be baptized. They sang in loud voices, marching the length of Main Street. Agnes Peyton, who had a voice like a trombone, led them. As they passed, others from the sidelines would keep a respectful distance, and follow the Baptists down the street, toward the Railroad depot and Raccoon Creek. By the time, they reached the swimming hole, there were 200 people, about half the town population, and all the kids. Everett McKibbon, the Minister, would wade into the creek, and waist deep, turn and lead a prayer. Then, the person to be baptized would be led into the water by assistants. Rev. McKibbon would take the person, hold his nose, and gently submerge him. The person would be quickly returned to an upright position, and be led to the bank, where someone would wrap him in a blanket. My friends and I always stood at a respectful distance up the bank from the ceremony, along with the men who sat at the storefront next to the post office. These gentlemen always took particular notice of some of the ladies who were to be baptized. As they marched down the street in their thin white garments, they left little to an active male imagination. As they struggled out of the water, completely wet, they must have been a gratifying sight indeed to these old fellows.

My mother never attended the baptisms, a relief to me. She had an over-active desire for my salvation in those days, and had she been at the baptism, she would have probably demanded that they dunk me.

While my Mom didn't go to baptisms, she did go to every other special ceremony of the protestant churches in town. This was usually a revival meeting, or a tent revival held by one of the roving evangelists during the summer. Each had the same unmistakable flavor and aroma. My Mother would announce that we were going. She would make me take a bath, and dress in my Sunday best. Her vise-like grip would propel me through town to the church. She would sing and pray and pinch me if she thought my attention strayed. Then, there would be the two things I dreaded most: Voluntary recitation by individuals of their newfound religion, called "Testimony". And finally, the dreaded Altar Call. At this point, my mother would almost interrupt the testimony of others as she tried to induce me to testify. I would protest that I was not a believer; that I had nothing to talk about; that I had been dragged here against my will. I felt the disapproving eyes of others on me. My heart rate was extremely high, my face felt hot—red—even purple—and I had to pee. I felt as though the entire church was watching me. Finally, the Minister made the Altar Call, where persons were to come to the front of the church, kneel, and be saved. More than my testimony, my mother wanted Jesus to take my soul. To a six-year-old, this sounded to me like dying. Besides, I didn't want to be associated with the women who usually responded to an altar call, rolling on the floor, shouting, talking in tongues. In later years, I realized that these women were acting in ways I associated with sexuality. Indeed, while I didn't understand at age six, some of my Mom's older lady friends always said "I 'spect there'll be more souls made than saved at this revival."

I initiated frequent talks with my Mom, attempting to gain an exemption from Testimony and the Altar Call. "Mom, I think the reason you want me to be saved is that I cause you so much trouble. I promise to be good from now on, if you just won't force me to go to church with you." "Charlie, I know you can be good if you want, to. But if you were saved, I think you'd be an even better boy." Invariably, I would lose these battles. Part of the reason for my loss was, I thought, that I was afraid to use all the arguments at my command. For example, I had evidence that just because you'd been saved, you weren't always good. My example was Maxine Peters, who'd been rolling all over everyone and shouting and speaking tongues at altar call. Then just two days later, Ronnie Martin and I had been playing kick the can downtown. We went behind the Town Hall to hide, and there was Maxine, in the back seat of her boyfriend's car. They were doing it, and she was rolling around and talking just the way she did at altar call. At the time, I was tempted to use, this powerful argument with my Mom. In retrospect, I'm really glad I didn't.