

Gimme That Old-Time Religion!
Gender and the May-November Homecoming Season
Karen Li Simpkins, PhD
Rockefeller Scholar-Affiliate, Marshall University

Two centuries ago, there were Communion Seasons; then there were Camp meetings; next, Revivals. Later, there were Protracted Meetings; later yet, Old Time Meetings and Dinners on the Ground. More recently, there were Brush Arbor Meetings; and finally, Homecomings. And now, something else seems to be developing on the horizon; new words are being heard in the wind. Even while I was doing my fieldwork in southwestern West Virginia in 1970 and 1971 going to two kinds of Homecomings, I was told by former professors in no uncertain terms, to listen very carefully. These gatherings had disappeared at the turn of the twentieth century! When I told my congregations that what they were doing just did not exist, most very graciously allowed me to photograph, film, and record this non-existent behavior. Still hearing this kind of talk at regional conferences, I have recently completed follow-up visits to Homecomings I attended over thirty years ago over one autumn (in 2000) and two summers (in 2001 and 2002). While Church Homecomings remain substantially the same, something is afoot in those held at cemeteries. And it is these which were said to have been discontinued at the turn of the last century! Yet, here they still are at this turn of the twenty-first century!

The earliest reference to a cemetery homecoming may just be an early nineteenth century quilt which Stafford and Bishop (1974: 100) describe as follows: "Patchwork and appliqué quilt with embroidery, Le Moyne Star, c. 1825. Dimensions unavailable. The colors of this extraordinary 'Kentucky Coffin Quilt' are tans, browns, and white. The outer border is a picket fence with some embroidered flowers growing between the pickets. Just inside the fence, coffins have been appliquéd and stitched with the name of each member of the family. As each member died, his casket would be permanently moved to the cemetery in the center of the quilt, where weeping willows can be seen. O tempora! O mores! (Kentucky Historical Society)" But there is more to this quilt than this description reveals. All the coffins are the old fashioned six-sided wood coffin. There are five white coffin outlines at the center top with six more at the top right corner descending down the border. There are four brown coffins, with name labels, in the center cemetery. Yet, across the bottom of this quilt are nine more brown coffins with name labels affixed. Two brown coffins at the bottom and two outline coffins look to have been sewn at one time on the quilt but removed later. However, all four coffins in the cemetery center are the brown with name labels. The pattern surrounding the center cemetery consists of Le Moyne eight sided-stars alternating with large printed squares. When I showed this photo to children in *Alum Springs* in the late (19)70s, they decided that the white coffins were for babies and little children who died in a "state of grace." The brown ones were for adults. The four coffins within the cemetery were people who had been "saved" before they died. The ones across the bottom of the quilt they discussed not only among themselves but later at the supper table. The discussion was whether these were for people who died in an "unsaved" state or were to show people who moved away and were known to have died but to have been buried elsewhere. This

explanation by kindergarten-elementary school aged children certainly fits far better with the Old Time Religion theology in the community than the description in the quilt history book!

What, you may ask, is a **Homecoming**. And, why two kinds? First, what it is not. It is not the more familiar high school / college homecoming football game, week, and dance where alums of the high school or college return for a reunion of old friends and classmates. Probably the best attended one is for one's 20th Class Reunion. This homecoming is well known throughout the USA. It's that last period when humans look relatively young, or how they looked in school; after that, the aging process takes over with a vengeance. No, **Homecomings** in churches and cemeteries are different. These annual gatherings between May and November for anyone with a connection to the congregation or the family allow for visiting. The annual business relating to the church or cemetery is done at this time. At least one worship service is held. A full-scale southern Sunday Dinner is brought. It is smorgasbord eating time. [Not that of Sweden,] that of the family reunion: the pile your plate high smorgasbord. The **Homecomings** held in cemeteries large and small in places near and far throughout Appalachia are held right out in the open; visible from the road, **if** you know where the road goes.

Years ago, when a neighbor's four year old son went to his first Homecoming, he wasn't very impressed with his big day. "All we did was go up on a hill for church outdoors and Mamaw's fried chicken, and [add emphasis] we passed three Col. Sander's' on the way. I know 'cause I counted them." You could tell from his face that his druthers would have been an outing to a "Kentucky Fried Chicken" franchise and Camden Park, the local amusement park. Sunday Dinner on a hillside during dog-days weather was not his idea of a good time. This is a meal with all the trimmings. Fried Chicken. A roast or ham. Pots of green beans and greens. Divers potato dishes. Cole slaw. Macaroni salad. Fresh tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers. Pies, cakes, breads. Soft drinks and iced tea or coffee. All spread out on long tables by category: meat, vegetable, bread, dessert. The eating rules are strict. You must have something from the food brought by each family. In the countryside, folks fill up a plate like they would at home. Children are allowed a dessert portion for example. If they want pie and cake, they get two half- portions. The reputation of fat people in Appalachia isn't really seen here. Now, at Church Homecomings in towns, you see some folks only going for the white foods. Or the kids loading up on desserts if they can get away with it. But these are best described by 'few' or 'some' rather than 'most' or 'all'.

There have been a number of changes in the homecomings held in family cemeteries since the early (19)70s. But are these superficial or substantive? Or adjustments as usual with the passage of time? The Homecomings are part and parcel of the old Communion Season; the May-to-November seasonal round of congregational and family reunions held in many evangelical tradition protestant cultures. For this specific Appalachian region, the season gets started with the Memorial Day or Decoration Day commemorations. Only here, all the graves are decorated, not just those of veterans. Starting with those memorials held after the Civil War to commemorate the war dead, by the Twentieth Century, all wardead graves were marked, at least at the level of the

national culture. [The Memorial Day parades are a different tradition. And in fact, the longest continuously held parade in the United States is held in a town within this same Huntington(WV)-Ashland(KY)-Ironton(OH) Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area of the U.S. Census Bureau in which the Homecomings I refer to are located.] In this region, all the dead's graves are marked. This means that all the gravesites are cleared of the just past year's litter, are tidied up, and new decorations placed on the graves. No grave is neglected. Each will get new flowers. These may be with crepe paper, wax, plastic or real flower bouquets and even live plantings. Veterans' graves will have the addition of small American flags, "Old Glory."

In this part of Appalachia cemeteries are seldom adjacent to churches. Consequently, the church reunion celebration and the family reunion celebration do not occur over the same extended weekend. Here the various congregations and family cemeteries have their own schedule of annual meetings. With lots of local folks working outside even the SMSA [a trend that began in *Alum Springs* during the (19)20s] this schedule has had nearly a century's stability. If anything, it is getting more complex. With continuing implementation of the federal Flood Control Act of 1938, there are many counties with local dam plus park recreation areas. So, family gatherings are beginning to be scheduled at these separate from the Homecomings previously linked to a specific church or cemetery. In other cases, the park setting is bringing Church and Cemetery Homecomings together at the same site but celebrated side by side. Side visits to the family cemetery or the church building are an available option to the day's outing. When two of these dam recreation parks were completed in the mid-1970s during the War on Poverty, several cemeteries whose access would have been cut off by a lake were relocated into what has become by the end of the twentieth century a community cemetery. What began as one location with five very distinct sections, each with its own identifier, as burials occurred, has become one. As most of the families who bury here are related to more than one of the original five extended families, this means that plots available in the other still open sections are selected. Some of the smallest sections no longer have plots available. In thirty years, it has become an interconnected community cemetery.

Churches on the floodplain also were relocated. Some of the smaller congregations merged with one nearby not in the dam/park confines. Others rebuilt in the more metropolitan parts of the county. There are Sunday church services at the community cemetery throughout the months of June, July and August. Some of these are the traditional meeting with dinner following; others are only worship meetings. And for some, the family reunion part with dinner has turned into a different celebration, no longer linked directly to a specific congregation or cemetery. The extended family group is being celebrated, and many of these folks now live elsewhere, join churches elsewhere, and increasingly bury elsewhere. Adjustments have been made to the continuing assimilation into the larger national economic life. While there are church homecomings during the summer months and cemetery homecomings during the fall, the Labor Day Weekend in early September shows that most cemetery meetings are held in the summer; most church homecomings in the fall. There is one last church homecoming the first Sunday in November. [Thanksgiving, later in the month, is as hugely celebrated here as elsewhere in the USA. But this celebration is focused more on the close extended

family, meaning the focus is on the grandparents, rather than on the extended family beyond the kindred limitation on first cousins.] So the last Church Homecoming would be on Reformation Sunday. This terminology, however, is not a common one in the area. Only a few Preachers remarked on this, notably those who had relatives marrying Presbyterians. October 31st is known as Reformation Day among Presbyterians, thus the Sunday closest to this date calls for a Reformation themed service.

Traditionally, Halloween would mark the end of the Homecoming Season. In addition to the masking on this date, in this area there is also the tradition of Beggars Night on October 30th. This tradition began early in the Twentieth Century if not before. This is the night the masked and costumed came around begging for candy. If candy was not forthcoming, the house was on the list for a trick visit on the 31st. Prior to WWII, this was the night teenagers and young adults, almost exclusively male, would be out. Beggars Night is still traditional in this SMSA today. However, since WWII, this night and Halloween have been reduced to pre-school and elementary school aged children. Each October, the local newspapers publish the Trick-or-Treat Night dates that different communities have selected. So today, there are several days when candy collecting is done, as some communities go by the older traditional dates. Then, others, often older kids, make a visit on as many days and times available anywhere within driving distance. These kids don't bother to dress up; they show up with at most a blackened face but definitely carrying a pillowcase to hold their plunder. There are still neighborhoods in the county, i.e. the countryside, where the old traditions occur on the old schedule. None of the "wait until the closest Friday or Saturday to the real calendar date of October 31st" as is often done now.

What this means out in the county is that the small children are taken around on Beggars Night where they may still be asked to perform something in order to get a Treat. The big old-time pranks routinely expected on Halloween include behavior which today would definitely be considered juvenile delinquency type mischief. Even fires are anticipated. This is not any fire. It is at specific locations. In addition, trees are cut down across the road in those same specific locations. Locally, folks know where the places are and regularly someone drives by throughout the night. These are haunted places, locations where someone was known in the past to have been murdered, to have committed suicide, or to have been buried improperly. The fire is to keep the ghosts confined, or so 'the old folks said.' The great delight is to have someone unsuspecting go along the road at those spots and cut down a tree across the road behind them having already cut down a tree further along the road. Now, if the trapped folks did not plan ahead and carry their own power saws with them, they can expect the raw eggs across the car windows tricks at the least. This is the realm of the good-old-boys, the mid-teens through mid-thirties aged males. As this age group is also likely to be drinking alcoholic beverages, the mischief can more than get out of hand. [Abandoned or empty property can be at true arson risk.] Today, this rowdy behavior can occur anytime during the last week of October.

Anyone on the roads after a "decent hour" will be in jeopardy. Hence the regular patrols by the older men in the neighborhood. [If the fires are not put out, they can expand and

become forest fires during an especially dry autumn. Fires set at any other time or location during the fall are considered to be arson which is not considered a juvenile offense even here. Putting out forest fires is one way to earn 'extra' money in WV.] This affects attendance at mid-week church and school evening activities for that week. Women especially will not be out late on those evenings, if at all. The church activity will be shortened or there will be folks available to provide an escort or the local patrols will be out to provide a rescue. In other words, people in the rural neighborhoods plan around anticipated misbehaviors. Mischief is contained. In more urbanized areas, such mischief was even anticipated before WWII. [A particularly legendary incident of a cow placed on top of one particularly nasty man's shed is a case in point. The day following Halloween, the boys involved were brought around by their fathers to get the cow down with lots of onlookers gathering as well. Finally, the boys were let in on the joke, now very much on them: while a cow can be led to go up, it will not come down no matter how much pushing and pulling is done - unless blindfolded.] After WWII, the standards tolerated for such mischief were significantly lowered. Consequently, Beggars Night and Halloween developed into Trick or Treat Night(s) by the (19)70s. Today, in more built-up areas with lots of families, block parties pull in adults as well as small children and teenagers. All within sight, though out of earshot, of each other. A lot of this, however, depends on the weather. These are more common when balmy Indian summer weather, highly variable at best, is expected around this time.

Worship services at both homecomings remain the same compared to thirty years ago. The differences between them had occurred already by the 1970s. The worship service of the Cemetery Homecoming is a local version of an ecumenical service. As ecumenical basically means beyond the doctrinal limits of a religious group, the groups concerned here are the different denominations of what Loyal Jones calls the Old Time Religions typical of Appalachia. These have also been called the Calvinist Baptist tradition: the United Baptists, the Primitive Baptists, the Separate Baptists, the Regular Baptists, the Freewill Baptists, the Missionary Baptists, the Independent Baptists the Two Seed in the Sprit Baptists. It definitely includes the old Campbellites. All of these denominations with as many affinities to Presbyterians as to Baptists and more closely related outside the region to Southern Baptists than to any other denomination. Depending upon how many different local denominational groups are represented among the families burying in a particular cemetery, will be how ecumenical a worship service can be anticipated. Only if everyone burying in a family cemetery belong to the same denomination will the worship services of both Homecomings be the same. Everyone who contributes to the financial upkeep of the cemetery will likely expect some aspect of "their churches" doctrine to be represented in the worship service. All of this would have been taken care of in the prior planning for the homecoming.

Who does what for these gatherings is where gender is marked. It is an overstatement to say that the men do the religious related activities and the women the food related ones. These are denominations where only males may become Preachers. Women are eligible for all other offices: Teachers, Clerks, Singers, and Delegates to the annual conference meeting. The only religious office to which they are barred is that of the ordained minister. While women appear to be the sole gender preparing the dinner foods brought,

they are the ones directing when, where, how the foods will be set out. [But men do cook. Men are known to cook.] Some of the foods brought will have been prepared by men. But they will not be the ones to dictate where that food will be placed for the buffet line for dinner. Nor will that female be just any woman. Only older women are entitled to make these decisions; and not just any older woman. Grandmothers, especially, and other older women, direct the flow of goods brought out when it is time to eat. Men set up tables or move benches about. It's visibly very subtle. People just know what to do – it's been going on forever as far as anyone living knows.

It goes without saying that local folks know where and when to go to a homecoming. How can someone just driving through know where to go to even ask when such a meeting will be held? Churches are closer to the road, so let's begin with them. If you see a church building with what looks like a large carport filled with what looks like stored picnic benches, you have a place to begin. Just come back when church services are held. But this won't necessarily be on Sunday morning. This could be Friday evening, Saturday evening, or Sunday evening. It varies by congregation. What will be likely held on Sunday morning will be a Sunday school. Often, the Sunday school enrollment is larger than the congregation membership. The Sunday school is similar to what other denominations call a Bible School. That is, it is not a doctrinal school. The doctrines are learned by attendance at Preached services. The children's Sunday schools are taught by Teachers, not Preachers. The adult class is altogether different. Here, the attending adults do their bible homework. Ordained men who are Preachers get grilled. The congregation will typically have more than one Preacher as a member. This Sunday school class does not automatically include a man serving as a pastor. For here, each Sunday service of a month is allocated to a different Preacher. A fifth Sunday, or when a regularly expected man can not come, will be the usual time for the congregation's pastor to Preach. So a given Preacher who comes on a First Sunday of the Month, for example, may only have this to do each month. Or, he may have a full month of appointments at four different congregations. The fifth Sunday may be the pastor's, or it can include a visit by one of the group's Convention Elders who would have been invited by the congregation. The clerk issuing this invitation can as easily be a woman as a man.

So now your driver has a place and a time to ask about when a Church Homecoming will be held. What about Cemeteries? There are a few visible from a main paved road. But most will be located off these, on the back roads. And usually, off roads which branch from the back roads. They aren't hidden. County maps and US Government geological maps show them. They are located in places with an eastern orientation. Today, the woods obscure this view. But when most of these were begun, the surrounding hillsides were covered with plowed fields, not secondary growth forest. And there would have been an eastern view. The orientation of the graves is such that if all the folks buried could sit up, all would face the East. Jerusalem. The oldest graves are easily located. They indicate the east-west movement of the sun at the time of the year when the burial occurred. Today this alignment is uniform and both birth/death dates are on the tombstones. The old graves may have only a stone slab marker, with at most a name. The family bible will have all the information. In any case, the families

know who is buried where. Children learn this orally. Children learn not to walk over a grave. Even a small toddler learns from the other children, not to walk on a grave, but to go around it. Older kids as they play, as they run and chase about, go around or jump over. They won't step on a grave. The imagery of "the dead are as asleep" is a very pronounced one. And when the "trumpet sounds up yonder, the quick and the dead will rise up and go forth to meet their Maker on that Last Homecoming Day."

I attended a Singing School in the (19)70s to learn the shaped-note white gospel four-part harmony singing. The Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Company [of Chattanooga, TN; Pangburn, AR; and Dallas, TX] **Joyful Praise** (1971) was our text. In two earlier editions from this company, **Gospel Light** (1955) and **Crowning Joy** (1957) there are two songs specifically referring to the Grand or Great Homecoming. B.I. Cline's (1955) **The Grand Home-Coming Day** goes as follows:

That will be a happy reunion when the Lord shall call His own,
And the sainted millions are gathered 'round the Father's shining throne, the throne;
We shall see our friends and dear loved ones evermore with them to stay;
When we meet uyp yonder in glory on that grand home-coming day,

Chorus: That will be a grand home-coming when the saints are gathered home,
There we'll join our friends and loved ones singing praise around the throne;
We'll be free from sin and sorrow when all cares have passed away,
Won't that be a happy tomorrow on that grand home-coming day?

Fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers joining in a glad new song,
Praising Christ our blessed Redeemer with that happy ransomed throng, glad throng;
At the shining portals He'll meet us with the saints in bright array,
With a smile and welcome He'll greets us on that grand home-coming day, glad day.

Luther M. Hutchins' (1957) **On That Great Home-Coming Day** also has two verses with chorus:

There will be a great home-coming up in glory,
When the saints shall reach that city there on high, there on high;
What a happy time 'twill be, singing, shouting victory,
On that great homecoming day by and by, by and by.

Chorus: Oh, be ready, Oh, be ready, for that great homecoming day,
Over yonder, over yonder, where no one will ever sigh;
Loved ones meeting, loved one meeting, old friends greeting, old friends greeting,
On that great home-coming day by and by, by and by.

What a day of great rejoicing up in glory, up in glory,
As we praise the One who came for us to die, came to die;
There forever gone will be, when His smiling face we see,
On that great home-coming day by and by, by and by.

There are many other songs with the words, 'Meeting,' 'Singing,' 'Home,' 'Happy Reunion,' in the titles, verses and/or chorus which are sung by the Singers grouped in four quartets prior to and during the homecoming services. And if, after the Dinner there is a Singing in the afternoon, there will be Trios, Duets, and Solo performers. They will perform in a set of paired Rounds. That is, each group will sing a slow song and a fast paced song. In the second Round, some singers in each group will sing with another group. Again, a slow and a faster-paced song. Here is where you can see who the 'natural singers' are. Those who can sing with anyone and harmonize without practice are seen. Bragging, or being big on oneself, is not valued in this community. At the end of a round only will there be a break. New groups arriving or ones leaving who have already sung will regroup for another couple of rounds. This can go on and on through the afternoon. Requests from the audience will be made. There will finally be one last round announced. Often, a Singing is held as a fundraiser for a local family who needs help and for whom there is no insurance coverage for the medical or disaster relief. Singing and Teaching are considered forms of Witness. As is Preaching. Christians are called upon to Witness in their daily lives.

Or, you could get another Preaching in the afternoon. And, there may be more than one Preacher. At the least, an announcement will be made about a Revival starting someplace. These old-time religions have adult conversion entry into membership. These conversions take place through the Revival institution. If one is converted from one's worldly ways during a revival, a Baptism will take place. Then the congregation one is joining will have a Foot-Washing Service. This includes a Communion Service. These latter two terms are interchangeable for the announced service to come. It is a joint service.

As you can gather, the Homecomings are important features to the religious life within the community. Revivals and Singings can happen anytime the necessary situations calls for them to be scheduled. But Homecomings are annually held. And most people have more than one which they can attend. And most Sundays throughout the May-November time have more than one Homecoming available to attend. Choices have to be made. If a community member actually had a biological link to every cemetery and congregation in the community, it would take five years to go to every single one available to the residents of *Alum Springs*. And many folks are that linked. There's a whole lot of visiting going on. The smallest cemetery had only seven graves in 1970; the largest had over 600. A few are even "abandoned." This means, the cemetery is no longer open. It means that at the least, there is no one with a grandparent buried there. That probably the decisions of each the great-grandchildren who could bury there have been to be buried elsewhere. The cemetery is no longer used. It gets grown over. However, during my revisits early in this twenty-first century some abandoned looking cemeteries are not turning out to be abandoned. There is talk of, and actual, meetings in cemeteries which have not held Homecomings since the (19)70s.

These memorial services after the burial have not gone the way of the Dodo no matter what academicians have said throughout the twentieth century. It is true that the funeral service common in the nineteenth century for one buried during the winter when few could attend noted by John Campbell in his **The Southern Highlander and His Homeland** (New York: Russell Sage, 1921) has, indeed, disappeared. It has long been possible to have a funeral with burial following. It is more likely now to have a funeral at a Funeral Home even if the weather does not permit a Burial immediately following. I attended one only last September. Even by the early (19)70s, Funeral Homes had facilities to store a casket until an isolated cemetery can be accessed. The old time Wake held at home or at the Funeral Home still done then, has been reduced today to a viewing and visiting period immediately prior to the funeral service.

My own family cemetery is so isolated that if the day preceding the Homecoming has had a hard and heavy rain, it is known to be automatically cancelled. No phone calls have to be made to let you know this. If you show up, you risk a daylong adventure getting unstuck from the mud road which is off the back road. And there won't be anyone there to help you unless you have a cell phone. Even then, you'd have to walk back down to the back road to meet your rescuer. Getting your car unstuck would wait until the mud returned to dirt. And in some parts of this access road, the mud never dries out. The old foot-path shortcut remains the only way in or out during any kind of weather. This cemetery has a wire fence around it. It has two outhouses, one for men, another for women. It has an open-sided roof over a concrete floor with a pulpit and picnic benches. It has a trashcan. At the entrance gate, it is apparent that someone comes regularly and builds a fire. There is evidence of pop and beer cans and bottles. Some are placed in the trashcan inside the cemetery, others are not. Yet there is never evidence of any vandalism in the cemetery itself. Apart from the erratic and immediate need for a burial, it is visited only once every year. The same time as it was last year and as it will be next year. This cemetery, as many others dotted through Appalachia, is still open. So it is still visited. And it will be as long as there is a grandparent's grave there to visit. See you next summer. Y'all come now.

P.S. #1: There'll be a Sunday Dinner ready and waiting, it if doesn't rain. Then, you'd best stay home. Otherwise, dress for church. There will be a Church Homecoming somewhere then anyway.

P.S. #2: If you come later to the family reunion at the lake, you can be sure of a visit up to the cemetery. No worship service though. And no dinner there. That's back at the last marina access under open-air cover. No need to dress up for this visit.