

# Community Events and Rural America

By Dennis Coelbo

Both professional people, they had worked until the last minute, and then left their jobs in Atlanta for the long, hot drive that September Saturday afternoon. Mrs. Betty Highsmith remembered the disquiet at being unable to personally prepare any food. The family, the neighborhood, and the community would all be gathered at Old Empire Primitive Baptist Church in southeastern Berrien County, Georgia, for the yearly Homecoming. There would be singing, dinner-on-the-grounds, preaching, and the chance to visit the graves of friends and relatives just across the new road from the church. Decades of parked wagons had finally worn a path that separated the church from the cemetery. Recent county improvements had brought paving to the path and put a bridge over the little stream, thereby eliminating the bothersome shoes-off trek through the creek.

As they drove south through the heat of the day, Mrs. Highsmith recalled Homecoming meetings at Old Empire that she had attended as a little girl. She remembered her father standing outside the church on Sunday morning, inviting each returning pilgrim to dinner at the farm. Once, over 60 people accepted his cordial hospitality. The family had all worked for days to prepare the household, and a half-century later, the memory of hospitality gladly given and received still shines without tarnish. Food, family, and fellowship all mixed nostalgically in her mind as they approached Tifton. Mrs. Highsmith was uneasy: it would not be right to come to Homecoming without some kind of food.



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American Folklife Center / Library of Congress Photo by Carl Fleischauer





Photo by Howard W. Marshall  
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1 Plate of traditional foods served at a dinner at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Damascus, Georgia  
2 Dinner on the grounds, Royal family singing convention, Mystic, Georgia  
3 Array of homemade desserts prepared for annual homecoming at Bethel Baptist Church, Worth County, Georgia

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Pulling into Tifton, they drove quickly across town to the courthouse square. Thank the Lord, the bakery was still open. They dashed in and, with her husband's encouragement, she bought every cake and pie in the store—nearly \$75.00 worth. After carefully loading the food in the car, they set off on the final 30 miles to the church. They felt ready to do their part.

Throughout rural America, community events such as Homecomings act as centripetal forces pulling members back into the center of values, of behaviors, of world view all tied together in activities that reinforce the past and tailor the future. While Homecomings in the southeast tend to be most strongly developed in a sacred or religious context, secular forms exist as well, blossoming forth to cover all the symbolic territory in ways that accomplish some manifest goals and, at the same time, present community style, i.e., the appropriate behavior in the appropriate fashion.

Human society is built on the expectation of predictable behavior. Community events in America reinforce and restate the expected style of behavior in attempting to reintegrate distant members to the community's values. No event, no matter how tedious, is all work—nor is any festivity all frolic. Perhaps there is something in humanity that best transmits and receives cultural statements as a mixture of frivolity and determination.





4 Sacred Harp Sing at Georgia Agrirama

5 Jam Session at the home of Preston Newell, Tift County, Georgia.

#### Suggested Reading

Crew, Harry. *Childhood: A Biography of a Place*. (Bacon County, Ga.). New York: Harper and Row, 1978.

Fel, Edit, and Tamas Hofer. *Proper Peasants: Traditional Life in a Hungarian Village*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969.

Gutowski, John A. *American Folklore and the Modern American Community Festival: A Case Study of Turtle Days in Churubusco, Indiana*. Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1977.

Herring, J. L. *Saturday Night Sketches: Stories of Old Wiregrass Georgia*. Tifton, Ga.: The Sunny South Press, 1978 (1918).

Merton, Robert K. *On Theoretical Sociology*. New York: The Free Press, 1967.



The Homecoming at Old Empire is an example. Each year, in preparation for the event, the church cemetery receives its annual cleaning and arranging. The yearly pilgrim strolls through the ordered grounds, rarely sensing that each August, nature, Sysiphus-like, nearly recaptures the grounds before being driven back by volunteers from the congregation. Cleaning the graveyard is hot, dirty, and often melancholy work that nonetheless needs to be done.

While few events are ever total gaiety, even fewer are unrelieved work. In South Georgia, land clearing meant neighborhood gatherings for a "log-rolling" (putting cut timber into piles to be burned), while the women gathered on the porch or in the dog trot house to piece and quilt for the coming winter. Such hard-work days usually ended with a frolic. More recently, peanut shelling for seed, corn husking, and even the tobacco harvest were followed by a covered dish supper, singing, and old-style dancing. Luther Creech of Mitchell County, Ga., recalls how he would somehow lose the bone-weary fatigue of day-long work in the cotton fields when one neighbor or another would dispatch a car or wagon to fetch him to lead, teach, and call a dance. "Seems there was always some reason for a frolic, back then," he said.

In Solsberry, in Greene County, Ind., the community began an annual fish fry to raise money for the volunteer fire department. But the event was so successful that it became part of the town's sudden self-consciousness and developing internal cohesiveness after years of gradual decline. After awhile, it was almost as if the money raised was irrelevant. More importantly, the community pulled together to establish and continue the event. Local musicians who revived old skills to provide entertainment suddenly found their activities spilling over into church functions and other community activities. The goal was to buy new equipment for the firemen, but along the way, Solsberry gained a new coherence.

Motives for public events are of course subject to the winds of economic, political, and social change. From the 1890s through the 1950s, rural America centered secular celebration at the local school. John R. Griffin of Lenox, Ga., now 83, fondly remembers playing his fiddle for school closings each spring as the students filed out of the buildings. The neighborhood school in fact provided a center for the yearly cycle of opening ceremonies in the fall, recitations and drama in the winter, and frolics and closing events in the spring. Some of these activities were lost while others were transferred to local churches when economics forced the increasing consolidation of rural school systems after World War II.

The community and its institutions are tied to the common needs of its members for food, shelter, solace, and fellowship. Whether cooking for Homecoming or feeding the firemen, public participation in community events validates our membership in the cultural system, and provides a common sense of purpose, of contribution, of what needs to be done and how to do it.