



Holy Leisure: Recreation & Religion in God's Square Mile

Troy Messenger

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On July 31, 1869, twenty-two members of the holiness movement of the Methodist church gathered to pray on a beach on the New Jersey shore. Before long, Ocean Grove was established as "God's Square Mile," the first permanent camp meeting dedicated to the pursuit of both holiness and recreational activities. In this richly illustrated account, Troy Messenger looks at the numerous informal amusements of summer life at Ocean Grove and provides a glimpse into a fascinating moment in the development of both nineteenth-century religion and an American leisure culture.

Like other seaside resorts of the time such as Atlantic City and Coney Island, Ocean Grove boasted a festival atmosphere and offered such diversions as baby parades, oriental bazaars, pageants, beach games, ushers' marches, and drills by the Young Rough Riders. While guests were forbidden to drink, smoke, play cards, or drive their cars on Sunday, they were encouraged to enjoy other pursuits that would have scandalized pious Methodists of an earlier era, such as relaxing on the beach, taking the summer off, attending popular amusements, and staging comic gender satire with cross-dressed men. At Ocean Grove, however, even seemingly frivolous activities had a higher purpose: every aspect of daily life was focused on the attainment of perfection and all were performances of "holy leisure."

The genius of Ocean Grove, Messenger argues, was in extending holiness from the parlor meeting to the beach. Here, conservative evangelicals discovered a moral imperative to enjoy rest and recreation. By praying and playing together, the people of Ocean Grove acquired a unique understanding of self and community, one that illuminates the liberal social-reform movements of the nineteenth-century religious middle class and the early leisure industry.

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