

## **ADVENTURES IN THE BIBLE BELT**

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**By James A. Haught**

**For many years, I was the Gazette's religion reporter and, believe me, I met some amazing denizens of Appalachia's Bible Belt.**

**Does anyone remember Clarence "Tiz" Jones, the evangelist-burglar? Jones had been a West Virginia champion amateur boxer in his youth, but succumbed to booze and evil companions, and spent a hitch in state prison. Then he was converted and became a popular Nazarene revivalist. He roved the state, drawing big crowds, with many coming forward to be saved.**

**But police noticed a pattern: In towns where Jones preached, burglaries happened. Eventually, officers charged him with a break-in. This caused a backlash among churches. Followers said Satan and his agents were framing the preacher. The Rev. John Hancock, a former Daily Mail reporter turned Nazarene pastor, led a "Justice for Tiz Jones" committee. Protest marches were held.**

**Then Jones was nabbed red-handed in another burglary, and his guilt was clear. He went back to prison.**

**Another spectacular West Virginia minister was "Dr." Paul Collett, a faith-healer who claimed he could resurrect the dead - if they hadn't been embalmed. Collett set up a big tent in Charleston and drew multitudes, including many in wheelchairs and on crutches. The healer said he had revived a corpse during a previous stop at Kenova. He urged believers to bring him bodies of loved ones, before embalming.**

**Collett moved his show into the old Ferguson Theater and broadcast over Charleston radio stations. One night he said a cancer fell onto the stage. Another night, he said he turned water into wine.**

**I attended a service and wrote a skeptical account - focusing on his many money collections. After the article appeared, 40 of Collett's followers invaded the Gazette newsroom, then on Hale Street. Luckily, it was my day off. The night city editor called police, and also summoned burly printers from the type shop, who backed the throng out the door.**

**Collett claimed to have 10,000 adherents in Kanawha County. For five years, he collected money to build a 12-doored "Bible Church of All Nations," which was to be "the biggest tabernacle in West Virginia." Then he moved to Canada, leaving not a rack behind.**

**He returned some years later and preached at a serpent-handling church on Scrabble Creek near Gauley Bridge. (I often wrote about the ardent mountain**

worshippers who pick up buzzing rattlesnakes and thrust their hands into fire to show their faith. They're earnest and decent people - even though they have a high mortality rate during prayer services.)

The leader of the Scrabble Creek church, Elzie Preast - who never took money from members - began to suspect that Dr. Collett was bilking his congregation. In an Old Testament-type showdown, the two ministers scuffled, one shouting "Manifest him, Lord!" and the other yelling "Rebuke the devil!"

Then Dr. Collett vanished for good. Meanwhile, the serpent churches spawned other tales:

Once a weekly newspaper printed photos of church weddings, including one in which the bride and groom each held a rattler.

Another time, we heard that politicians in a rural county allowed serpent-handlers to meet in the dilapidated courthouse. Some snakes escaped into crevices in the walls - and emerged weeks later, causing bedlam among courthouse employees.

A former University of Charleston sociologist, Dr. Nathan Gerrard, studied the serpent phenomenon. He administered a psychological test to the Scrabble Creek flock, and gave the same test to a nearby Methodist congregation as a control group. The serpent-handlers came out mentally healthier.

Once the great Harvard theologian Harvey Cox accompanied Dr. Gerrard and me to a different serpent church, on Camp Creek in Boone County. When the worshippers began their trancelike "dancing in the spirit," we were surprised to see Dr. Cox leap up and join the hoofing.

Later, visiting professors accompanied us to a third serpent church, at Fraziers Bottom, Putnam County. One professor's wife, barely five feet tall, was an opera soprano. The worshippers - whose music usually is the twang of electric guitars - asked her to sing. She stood on the altar rail and trilled an aria from La Boheme while the congregation listened respectfully.

Meanwhile, the parade of colorful evangelists never stopped. One was Charleston faith-healer Henry Lacy, who handed out calling cards saying simply "Lacy the Stranger." He often came into the Gazette newsroom to lay hands on reporters to cure their hangovers.

He once offered to halt a cold wave in West Virginia, if state officials would return his driver's license, which had been confiscated.

And there was roving healer A.A. Allen, who visited West Virginia with jars containing froglike bodies that he said were demons he had cast out of the sick. He vanished after a revival at Wheeling, and was found dead of alcoholism in a San Francisco hotel room with \$2,300 in his pocket.

(Marjoe Gortner, the boy evangelist who later confessed that his show was a fraud, said Allen once advised him how to tell when a revival was finished and it was time to go to the next city: "When you can turn people on their head and shake them and no money falls out, then you know God's saying, 'Move on, son.'")

**And "the Plastic Eye Miracle," the Rev. Ronald Coyne, visited the Charleston Civic Center. He was a one-eyed evangelist who said a faith-healer had enabled him to see through his artificial eye. Several of us in the audience wrapped tape over his good eye, and he read items aloud, using his empty eye socket. It seemed legitimate, and I was mystified.**

**Those were heady days in the Bible Belt - before evangelists created million-dollar TV empires and became the ayatollahs of the Republican Party. The holy rovers of yesteryear provided marvelous theater. Today's mountain religion seems pale in comparison.**

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