

## Bloomsburg's Tabernacles

By William M. Baillie

The Tabernacle in Bloomsburg was the scene of the greatest religious outpouring the town has ever known. That large temporary auditorium was built by volunteers specifically for a regional Christian crusade led by an Irish-born evangelist, Rev. William P. Nicholson. In a five-week series of nightly meetings in the dead of winter—January 6 to February 7, 1915—the tabernacle housed crowds ranging up to 4,300, with a total attendance of over 102,000.



Once the evangelist was under contract to come to Bloomsburg, the sponsoring consortium of churches raised funds and gathered volunteers to build the large barn-like tabernacle. (The building took its name from the temporary portable “house of God” that traveled with the Israelites for forty years in the Wilderness.) It was on Market Street near Sixth, convenient both to the railroad station at Seventh Street and to the trolley tracks which turned the corner a block away at Fifth.

The structure was wooden, substantial but unfinished inside, and erected in just one week. It had electric lighting, benches for seating, space for a choir of hundreds at the front, and the traditional “sawdust trail” or aisles to allow “seekers” to move to the front. On the first Sunday, both afternoon and evening crowds exceeded 3,000, with hundreds standing, and hundreds more turned away. The organizing committee called again on volunteer carpenters, who in just one day extended the front of the structure to hold an additional 750 eager attendees.

Interest in the crusade was exceptional across the region, not just in the town. A month before the scheduled start, the *Morning Press* featured a cartoon showing the Devil scared away by a toy model of the Tabernacle in a store window. Once the meetings were underway, the Bloomsburg newspaper featured the crusade in front-page banner headlines almost every day for the whole five weeks. A front-page box reported attendance and offering amounts for the previous night and cumulative totals for the crusade.

Each night “delegations” came from specific surrounding communities, businesses, and organizations. Special meetings were held in many local factories as well as in a number of churches.

Rev. Nicholson was accompanied, as usual in his crusades, by singer/song-leader Raymond Hemminger, whose rich baritone voice easily filled the large auditorium. The songster also led a choir of over a hundred local church singers.

One of the evangelist's key emphases was to decry the liquor trade. Temperance forces organized a huge "anti-booze" parade in Bloomsburg on the second Saturday night. At the same time, the county court was considering applications for liquor-serving permits, and the crusade gathered hundreds of signatures on "Remonstrances" against liquor permits; the county-court judge dramatically reduced the overall number of permits granted.

In 1914-1916 the Nicholson-Hemminger team led month-long crusades in several Pennsylvania cities, including Darby, Lancaster, Milton, and Danville. The Bloomsburg event outshone them all, setting records for the most attractive tabernacle, most converts (1,880), and largest cash offering to the evangelist's team.

The 1915 structure was not the first "tabernacle" in Bloomsburg. Almost 20 years earlier, in February 1896, the Methodists were razing their church at Market and Third Streets in order to erect a new, much larger building. In the interim they constructed a wooden tabernacle on Market next to the Leader Store at Fourth Street.

The Methodist tabernacle was a frame building with a frontage of 48 feet and a depth of 104 feet. The rear area could be divided off by a movable glass partition for Sunday School classes, etc. When opened up, the hall could seat about a thousand worshippers. The structure was fitted with steam pipes and radiators for heating (using steam from the town steam plant) and gas lamps for lighting. The front facade featured stained-glass windows rescued from the old brick church.

The Methodists' tabernacle stood until the new Methodist stone church was dedicated on September 19, 1897. Two months before that date, the tabernacle's wood, pews, doors, windows, and radiators were offered for sale, upon condition that the buyers removed the items within 30 days after September 19. Later the site was used for a garage for the Letterman Bakery, which succeeded the Leader Store.