

JOE HOLDEN PICNIC

by Jo Radner

What can you do with an endowment of \$3.00? Quite a bit, if you're the East Otisfield Free Baptist Church. In 1900, an Otisfield citizen named Joe Holden bequeathed that princely amount to the church for support of the annual Sunday School Picnic.

Well, to tell the truth, it isn't the money that has kept the picnic going all these years. It's the reputation of the donor — and the spirit of his heirs. Joseph W. Holden — *Professor* Holden, "the old Astronomer," as he called himself — had an extraordinary theory, which he had engraved on his tombstone: he claimed that he had, "while a boy at school, discovered that the earth is flat and stationary, and that the sun and moon do move." He had conducted an ingenious experiment: one night he placed a measured amount of water in a basin outdoors on a stump. The next day, all the water was still there — thus proving, according to the scientist, that the earth was stationary, since if the earth were moving, some water would have slopped out.

It is unclear whether anyone else in Otisfield ever subscribed to Holden's theory. But rural Maine has always loved eccentricity. His memory has stayed alive in Otisfield. For the past 18 years, Rev. Gertrude DeCoteau has held the annual Joe Holden Picnic on the last Sunday in August at the East Otisfield Baptist Church on Rayville Road ("one of the quietest places in town," as Rev. DeCoteau calls it). It's become a church picnic with a difference: Joe Holden actually attends and proclaims his scientific findings, in the person of Mr. Ellis Stone, who puts on a derby hat for the event and ad libs his part in a skit whose originality each year "saves us from boredom," according to DeCoteau, the inventor of this custom.

"Professor" Holden traveled widely in his time, lecturing on his theories from Portland to Aroostook County, haunting the State House in Augusta to buttonhole the legislators, and even speaking at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Although he certainly was eager to share his convictions, Rev. DeCoteau comments that he may have had other motives as well: his travels began right after his sister, a widow with five small children, came home to Otisfield to live in the same house with her bachelor brother Joe! (His sister was a woman of strong will and remarkable religious convictions, and stories about her are also locally treasured. Convinced that the strength of her faith would enable her to walk on water, she once attempted the feat on Otisfield's Saturday Pond — and soaked her voluminous skirts.)

Tongue in cheek, and proud of their quirky heritage, the congregation of the East Otisfield Free Baptist Church will continue to welcome one and all to the Joe Holden Picnic. Over the years, in fact, the event has attracted another endowment, from local historian William Spurr: \$200 toward provision of peanuts, popcorn, and strawberry (only strawberry!) ice cream.

"Every year we raise our cups to Old Joe," said the late Nellie Hankins of Otisfield. "Not for his scientific acumen, but to his positive and contrary spirit, and to his kindly nature."

If you come and enjoy the hospitality and visit the churchyard where the "Professor" now rests, you will also learn about the valiant community spirit of this little, "quiet" church, which raises money for an annual college scholarship, provides a picnic and worship service for area nursing homes, and has built a church in the Dominican Republic.

For more information, call Gertrude DeCoteau at (207) 743-2438.

For information about Annually Recurring Community Events, consult our data base at <http://www.westernmaineculture.org/WMCAFolk.html>