When people speak of America, they usually think only of the great cities in the East or the fashionable resorts of California and Florida. Yet almost one half of the population of the United States lives in the rural communities of the "wide open spaces," where life is so different from that in New York or in Hollywood films that one might think it was another world.

Hilaire du Berrier is known to our readers as the author of several amusing articles in previous issues of our magazine. He grew up in a typical rural community of the Middle West. He loves to talk about it, with mocking irony, to be sure, but also, after a life of adventure abroad, with a certain amount of nostalgia. His article presents an intimate glimpse into the mentality of the Middle West and is a good example of American humorous prose.—K.M.

The old-fashioned revival meeting was a great institution in the America I knew as a boy. When I close my eyes and think of the ugly, sprawling town I was born in, I sometimes wonder what people would have done if it had not been for an itinerant preacher who came around every fall, just after harvest time. He pitched his ragged tent in a little hollow down near the railway tracks and sold the farmers and village hicks an emotional jag every night for such chicken feed as he was able to coax out of them under the stress of excitement, via the old method of a pretty girl and a collection plate.

Life in that town was bare, bare, bare! You could not call it nude, for there is a certain beauty suggested by nudity. There was no beauty there. Only a muddy stream south of the town, called Louse Creek, where the village males and such stray dogs as cared to follow them used to troop down after work for a swim.

Then, on their way back, they would stop at the station to wait for the train to come in. There was only one event of the day of any importance in that town: a branch-line train that went west in the evening to a station about forty miles down the line and came back the next morning. In our lives it filled a place comparable to that of freighters plying between lost islands. At the station the boys got on Tommy Thompson's dray wagon and rode up to the post office along with the mail.

Around 6.30 every day the whole town drifted into the post office to stand around
and chew the rag about Jesse Cottner's two-headed calf or old man Swingling's water melons. The mail boxes had combination locks on them, but the people in my town were simple folk, and remembering the number of the box was about their limit. They just left them unlocked, everyone standing where he could keep an eye on the two-inch square of glass on the door of his personal mail cubicle, ready to pounce on anything that slid in.

An ex-cowpuncher named Whitcomb was the postmaster, and from time to time an urchin got down on his knees and peered through the letter slot to see if he had finished distributing the first-class mail. If he had, that ended all hopes of drawing anything interesting on this deal. It was like a sort of poker game, and those with a good hand were considered correspondingly important. Newspapers and catalogues didn't count.

That was the extent of amusement in my town. The place was too small for a chautauqua, let alone a circus. They had a roundup once a year, at Wick's ranch up on Little Heart River; sometimes a couple of cowboys took up a collection and put on a prize fight, which they took turns winning; and on occasional Saturday nights there was a dance in a barn-like, tin-sided firetrap, known for some reason or other as "the Opera House."

The more profligate members of the community sometimes drove thirty miles to the County Fair, to watch a daredevil named "Lucky" Bob fly over town in an aeroplane, and came back with the roofs of their mouths sunburned.

Once a year a wandering show troop led by an actor named Richard Kent blew into town for a three-day stay. Mr. Kent had a Paderewski haircut and a stentorian voice and always a long line of admiring youngsters behind him. Most of his plays were written by himself between performances and were melodrama of the mellowest. One night was always a Swedish dialect opus named Ole and His Sweetheart, or Ole, The Swede Detective, or something like that, and another was invariably about the villain and the mortgage with Mr. Kent playing the villain.

When you had gone through these you had exhausted the place, if it were not for Reverend Ford, the preacher who came around every fall to lead his people out of Egypt. It was usually a neck-and-neck race between Mr. Kent and the preacher as to who would get there first, before the other got the pickings.

REVEREND Ford called himself a Holy Roller. On warm summer evenings, sitting on our front porch, you could see the glow of light from the door of his tent, while from under the flaps and through such rents and tears as he hadn't bothered to sew up during the day came music and a beckoning voice. The canvas was getting old and rotten, and every night some drunk or a hysterical convert went through it somewhere.

A warm glow seemed to emanate from that tent. It was the only spot of color and noise and life in our town at night, and it only came once a year. So, one by one, the scoffers and loafers and the faithful were drawn to it as by a magnet. Those who couldn't get inside and grab a seat on the rough planking laid across wooden cases (originally designed to hold twelve bottles of near-beer) stood outside
under the stars; and around them the village dogs gathered and the children.

Loneliness was something everyone seemed to be running away from in that town, and when they went down to that tent, it was with the intimation that this was just one of the things they were willing to sink down to in order to escape from being lonely. Then, after they had got there, the singing and shouting and all the hallelujahs seemed to get them.

Up on our porch we could hear them, off key and noodling their words, but loud as an army: "Jesus will do what-cher want him to! Jesus will do wha-tochew want him to!"

Kelly Wright, a bearded old wife-beater, would be rolling all over the planking at the feet of the preacher, calling on God to forgive him for the black eye he had given his poor wife Mary. Kelly got religion once a year, and socked Mary in the eye about once a week. And Maes Mullens, the cow-hand Kelly had prodded on with a shotgun the day he married his daughter, would be there with him.

Everyone was brother and sister at revival meetings, and you should have heard them shout: an "amen" here and a "glory hallelujah" there, they roared the tent down. Hired girls got up and screamed to be heard while they told of the wicked lives they had led and begged to be forgiven. As I look back on them now, the things they made such a to-do about may have been embarrassing for a few hired men and husbands and once in a while a neighbor lad, but as sinners they were a naïve and harmless lot.

By the time the revival meetings were over, everyone in town knew what everyone else had been up to in the past eleven months. But no one held it against the other (at least not until the preacher left town). Kelly Wright’s wife, with one eye just reaching a light purple now, would appear in the new hat Kelly had bought her under the initial impact of repentance and generosity, a hat that invariably made her look more like England’s Mary than Kelly’s, and Kelly would be forgiven.

The people in that town weren’t very good and they weren’t very bad. But they were sincere, and their last week of revival meetings every year was bedlam. No staying on the front porch for that last week! No sir, I wouldn’t have missed it for anything. There was such shouting and singing as you never heard in your life, and men and women kneeled along the row of SCHLITZ, NEAR-BEER cases that supported the planking of the pulpit.

An ex-veterinary who had done a year in prison for trying his hand, with fatal results, at illegal operations, would be sobbing his heart out and clasping the preacher around his legs, like the angel hugging the cross in that Sunday-school picture called "Rock of Ages."

The section-boss from the railroad would be there, tobacco juice running down from one corner of his mouth and his breath smelling of moonshine, blubbering about sins and the evils of drink and gambling and dancing. He was always drunk, there wasn’t any gambling, and he had probably never danced with anyone in his life; but he was ready to eschew all three of them if that made God happier. Dancing seemed to be a particularly heinous sin to Reverend Ford, and God an irritable and joyless old boss who frowned on that sort of nonsense during business hours, i.e., this mortal span.

After Reverend Ford left, it was always a month or two before the Swanson boys,
a couple of Swedes from out north of town who played the violin and the piano, could get enough of a crowd together to make a dance pay. Then gradually the town drifted back again and started storing up amateur and unsophisticated pleasures for another year's harvest.

All the boys in that town had some sort of ambition as to what they wanted to do when they grew up, usually goals ranging from farming to being a baseball pitcher, which was considered "tops" in those days, ranking about two degrees above being President. The only thing I wanted to be when I grew up was absent, and the farther the better. What I wanted to do was to get on a train, and somehow that was what happened one day. I went away from that town and never went back.

But one day, years later, something happened that made the memory of it and of those revival meetings return and stab me with the sort of poignant pain always caused by disillusionment, particularly if it is a disillusionment that destroys something one has lugged like a satchel, through years and countries, all the way from one's youth and from one's own hills.

I had moved into a cheap, theatrical hotel on Clark Street in Chicago, intending to stay a week and staying ten. The hotel was owned by the district attorney, but a Jew, known as Harry, ran it. Harry had originally made his money in a combination gambling joint and co-educational center, and the transition into an innkeeper had been a gradual one. In fact, he still had not completed it.

Most of his old crowd had come with him, squeezing into the comparative respectability of a hotel-where-you-had-to-register like a bargain-sale mob into a lift. The boy at the switchboard had handled the racing returns in the old establishment, and when he said "Number?" you always had the feeling he expected you to say "No. 2 in the sixth" instead of "Cottage Grove 4197."

Then there was a pretty blonde named Trixie, who used to bring a roll of bills in every morning and give them to a Pole who only had one name as far as anyone around the hotel knew. They called him Bruno, and Bruno spent most of his time smoking opium and drinking Coca-Cola. He called it kicking the gong around.

Harry's guests and staff could think of more things to do with their time than a Chinese can with bamboo, and through it all Harry walked around, bored as a Hai-Alai player.

This is only to give you an idea of the world I stumbled into when I wandered into this hotel and rented a room. Within a week the boys had found out that I wasn't a detective and had taken me into the fold. But unfortunately, it seems, I had just missed meeting the most interesting member of their colony.

While they sat around drinking the room-cliper's gin or home-made beer with half an inch of yeast in the bottom of the bottle, they kept talking about what a swell guy Pete was, and what a winter they would have when Pete came back. Here Bruno laconically informed me that Pete was in the "Christ racket."

That was a new one on me. The "Christ racket" had me stumped, so that
night I got hold of Ed Biang and asked him about it. Ed made his living selling lights guaranteed to give five times as much illumination with a smaller bulb. Incidentally, this business required a deft, sleight-of-hand, last-minute switch of bulbs that made the poor shopkeeper think he was running a streetcar instead of a lighting gadget when he got his light bill at the end of the month.

Ed explained that every year after harvest time Pete took his tent show on the road, did a two-months' tour, and then came back to Chicago for the winter.

"Oh, he's a great guy!" Ed went on. "Right now he is down at Pecatonica, about halfway between Rockford and Freeport, and rolling 'em in."

What it all boiled down to was that Pete was running a revival meeting to separate the yokels of Pecatonica from their harvest, a process of pocket-sifting which Pete blithely referred to as collecting his tithe.

We drove down to see him one Sunday, and, as we approached his tent, edging our way through a cluster of honest farmers about the open flap of the entrance, a magnificent, rolling voice could be heard from within, a voice like some great sea-wave that gathered force as it came along. It piled up and carried the ocean with it as it came, up, up, till you thought there could be no rolling back.

It came over the heads of people and out of the flap of that tent to meet us. There was all of kindliness and pity and the holiness of man in that voice. It called to you like Roland's horn at Roncevaux, and all that you asked it promised.

What it was saying didn't matter. For the sheer beauty of it you listened to the sound of words and not their meaning.

Bruno winked, "That's Pete for you!" He ran a kindly, tolerant glance over the multitude. Not contemptuous of hicks was Bruno. Everyone had his place in the great scheme of things: Pete needed men like these, and men like these needed Pete.

Inside the tent he pointed out a girl, a slender, painted blonde who had gone forward to tell her fellow sinners about the wicked life she had led before she got religion. In that mob, each trying to outdo the other in past wickedness, she had them all beat. She gave the whole story: music and wine and bright lights and red lights and such sin as the rest of that tent had only dreamed of and longed to find. And in the end she told them how one evening, thinking to have some fun baiting a preacher, she had come to the arms of a tent and been shown the light.

The farmers edged forward, straining to catch every word. What wouldn't they have given to have known her sooner! Through her they lived a thousand nights of sin, and with her they all repented together.

Sobbing, she sank to her knees. A voice rose from the crowd: "Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah! Amen!" The cry spread. It was my home town all over again.

Pete's reverent hand dropped tenderly on the per-
oxided head at his knees, and Mary Magdalene's name came from his lips in a whisper that was louder than all shouting. Bruno said: "That's Peaches. She used to work in Harry's joint, on the South Side, till she hooked up with Pete. Queenie is still out in the crowd: Pete will give her her cue when he gets the crowd worked up high enough, and she will finish them off."

An awful disappointment crept over me for a moment, a kind of sickness one gets when beauty is stripped from any being or institution one has revered and guarded in the cubbyhole reserved for Youth's memories.

Then I shrugged my shoulders. Life was bare, bare, bare in my town! What if that itinerant preacher of ours had been only another Pete? He gave those people something to think of. As a good jag, to let off steam, he did not cost any more than moonshine. Kelly Wright was kind to his wife for a month or two after. Those honest, simple folk felt better when it was over. The effect was the same.

The people of Pecatonica could not have felt any better if Pete had been sincere. In fact, they probably would not have felt so well; for where, in an honest man, could one ever find such artistry and such a voice?

There was a soft-drink stand a little way up the road, and Bruno stopped there to buy some ginger ale. He had brought a pocket flask along. The stand attendant, it turned out, was a trapeze artist who had been hurt doing his act without a net. After the accident his partner, a pickpocket who frisked the yokels while the aerial acrobat held their attention, left him in the lurch. So Pete had given the cripple the soft-drink concession at his revival meetings for nothing.

While we stood there waiting to be served, Bruno winked at me and jerked his thumb towards the small of the back of a farmer just ahead of him. There was a trace of tears in the lines of the rough skin beneath this farmer's eyes, and you could see his mind was far away. Like a sleepwalker he ordered a bottle of pop. The crippled acrobat, like a mincing monk, humbly asked: "What kind, brother?"

The farmer looked at his feet for a moment, apparently torn between spiritual thoughts and the illusive terms for classifying pop. Then, throat choked, he answered: "Red." That was all he could think of.

Bruno grinned and said: "Good old Pete!"