



MY MAINE

# Into the Wildwood

One writer finds a serene holiday moment in a quiet country church.

BY MICHAEL BURKE

**O**n the winter solstice last year, I went to a church in Madrid Township. I could have gone to any number of churches in the Farmington-Wilton area, but I'd heard about this one in the fall and wanted to see it. I drove an hour northwest into the remoteness of Madrid, turning off Route 4 onto Reed's Mill Road about 20 miles southeast of Rangeley, then another 5 miles to where a few cars were parked along the road. I looked around: no church, only trees. I got out and found the narrow, snow-covered driveway that led to the building, some hundred yards away, and I joined the quiet clusters of people plodding up the drive in the lengthening shadows of 3 P.M., on a day when the sun would set at 4:03.

The Reeds Mill Church has the kind of grace that comes from modesty in its every aspect. It's old – built in 1892 – and

it's a model of perfect proportions. Every wall and angle has the sharpest, cleanest lines, with four windows on each side, two doors in front, and another window centered between and slightly above those doors. Between that window and the roof is another diamond-shaped window, and there's a large belfry at the building's front. There is no attached shed or new additions and no ornamentation. The church is a perfectly rectangular box, so spare that its bathroom is an outhouse.

The building reminded me of the ancient Greek idea of the golden ratio, in which the lengths of the shorter and longer walls share the same ratio with the lengths of the longer wall and the sum of both walls. I didn't measure the church before I stepped inside, but I am convinced that the building is proportioned along something close to those lines.

Inside, what little heat there was came from a woodstove, and music wheezed out of a pump organ, the kind

where the organist presses on foot pedals to operate a bellows, generating the tone. The sheet-metal stove in the rear had been burning for hours, and the heat was transported by the longest stovepipe in all of Franklin County. It rose up a few feet from the stove, angled towards the roof and front doors, then passed over the heads of the congregation in their 10 pews before exiting through the ceiling. A person could sit warmly right beneath the stovepipe; the farther away the congregants sat, the more layers they kept on. Each window was decorated with three candles and a bit of greenery, and a half-dozen dim kerosene lanterns hung from the ceiling, the only illumination in a building lacking electricity.

The tone of the service was a holiday mixture of Protestant and ecumenical, with prayers and a homily delivered by Ginni Robie, a yoga instructor who has taken a leading role in preserving Reeds Mill Church. Mostly, the service consisted of song, with attendees calling out hymn titles for the organist to play. We sang only the first verses of each carol, or maybe two verses, so that everyone had a chance to hear their favorites sung. When Ann the organist began to slide off her bench from all the vigorous foot pumping, her husband left his pew to slip around behind her, bracing himself against a wall and holding her in place with his knees. As the service went on and the daylight diminished, Ann donned a headlamp to read her sheet music, and the rest of us tilted our hymnals towards the windows. We saw well enough to get through "Come to the Church in the Wildwood," sung at every gathering in the Reeds Mill Church. As candles were lit and passed, the service concluded with "Silent Night."

Afterwards, the perfectly proportioned church fell silent – and it would stay that way for seven months, until its first summer service in July. As the last of the congregation drifted down the snow-covered drive, a little light remained inside, fading slowly. ☀

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