

"GOD HEALS - I DON'T"

*So says Evangelist Oral Roberts who claims that
faith cures whether in a revival tent, or over TV*

by PHIL DESSAUER



A FEW MONTHS AGO, Bill McKechnie, the former major-league baseball manager, stood tensely with his wife before a shirt-sleeved evangelist in a Florida tent meeting. Mrs. McKechnie, he explained, was suffering from a "nervous depression," and 22 shock treatments had failed to restore her health.

The evangelist asked his congregation to join him in prayer as he placed his hands on Mrs. McKechnie's head and called on God for help. "Heal!" he cried. "Set her free!" He paused a moment, then shouted excitedly, "He's doing it!" The minister pressed the woman's head tightly, taut with concentration.

Suddenly, Mrs. McKechnie looked up at him and smiled—the first emotion she had shown—then she exclaimed rapturously, "I am myself again!"

Her husband, almost afraid to believe it, threw his arms around her and his voice choked as he said, "I'm overcome!"

After congratulations all around, the joyous McKechnies walked down a ramp to an exit, and another stepped up to be healed through "God's man for this hour," Rev. Oral Roberts of Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Cathedral Tent queues stretch endlessly as sick and halt wait turns to be healed.

The "healing" of Mrs. McKechnie seemed wondrous to them, but it was routine to the ardent followers of Oral Roberts. These disciples tell of cripples who throw away their crutches and walk—or even run—when he prays for them; of men and women with broken necks who take off their braces at his touch; of victims of cancer, epilepsy and polio who marvelously recover through faith in God and contact with "Brother Roberts."

Mrs. Anna Williams, 22-year-old wife of an Air Force sergeant at Wichita Falls, Texas, reported last May that she was healed of injuries and an illness that had confined her to a wheel chair. She wasn't even touched by Roberts; her "miracle" came one day as he was praying into her living room via a television set.

Mrs. Ethel Medford of Springfield, Massachusetts, wrote that after hearing Roberts' healing prayer on her radio she was cured of multiple sclerosis that had left her paralyzed and blind.

"I am not a healer," Oral Roberts insists. "I have no power to heal anyone; I am only an instrument in the hands of God. When God gives me the power, I can transmit His healing to those who have faith."

PRAISE FOR ROBERTS is not unanimous, however. There are many who consider him a kind of super-salesman of religion. And he doesn't deny that he uses every promotional device he can think of to "bring God to the masses."

To those who pledged \$10 a month to support his work he has promised special prayers for spiritual and material rewards. "And if at the end of 1955 our prayers have not been answered so that all you have given during the year has not been returned to you through un-



"I AM CURED, I AM CURED!" cry the worshippers, often before the laying on of hands.

expected earnings," he said, "I will refund every dollar you have contributed. This is how much I believe in God . . ."

Wherever Roberts sets up his vast "cathedral tent"—largest in the world—sinners, as well as the sick and crippled, flock to him. He claims to have "saved" as many as 5,000 in one night, and his goal is to save a million souls this year.

"Turn your faith loose," he exhorts his audiences. He also urges them to turn some of their money loose for the Lord's work: "You can't outgive God."

This high-powered evangelism is a costly operation. For the 37-year-old Pentecostal Holiness preacher has an organization of some 180 employees and tremendous plans for what he calls his "Outreach for the World." His pulpit, he proclaims, is "the earth." By the end of 1955, he hopes to be working on a \$3,000,000 annual budget, based entirely on freewill offerings and the sale of his literature.

His organization already owns a three-story office building in Tulsa, and is outgrowing it. Films of his tent meetings are shown weekly on almost 100 TV stations—he's aiming for 200 next year—and he broadcasts each week over some 250 radio outlets, including many overseas.

Since he started his TV broadcasts last February, Roberts' incoming mail has risen to more than 100,000 letters a month. He enlarged his tent to seat 14,000 and the first time he used it, at Florence, South Carolina, it couldn't handle the crowds. Two more sections were ordered to raise the capacity to 18,000. That day, 30,000 people crowded in and around the tent for the one meeting.

Roberts feels that he is ordained

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"The earth is my pulpit," he cries, "sells" religion like big business sells a product.

to carry God's healing power wherever it is needed. As he relates it, when he was a youth of 17, a victim of tuberculosis and a life-long stutterer, the Lord told him, "Son, I am going to heal you, and you are to take My healing power to your generation."

At that time, he lived with his parents near Ada, Oklahoma. His father, E. M. Roberts, was a preacher, and Oral was the youngest of five children. He says he received the message from God as he rode to a revival. He had been in bed for more than five months and was lying on a mattress in the back of a car. His oldest brother, Elmer, had used his last 35 cents to buy gasoline so that he could take Oral to Rev. George Moncey, an evangelist.

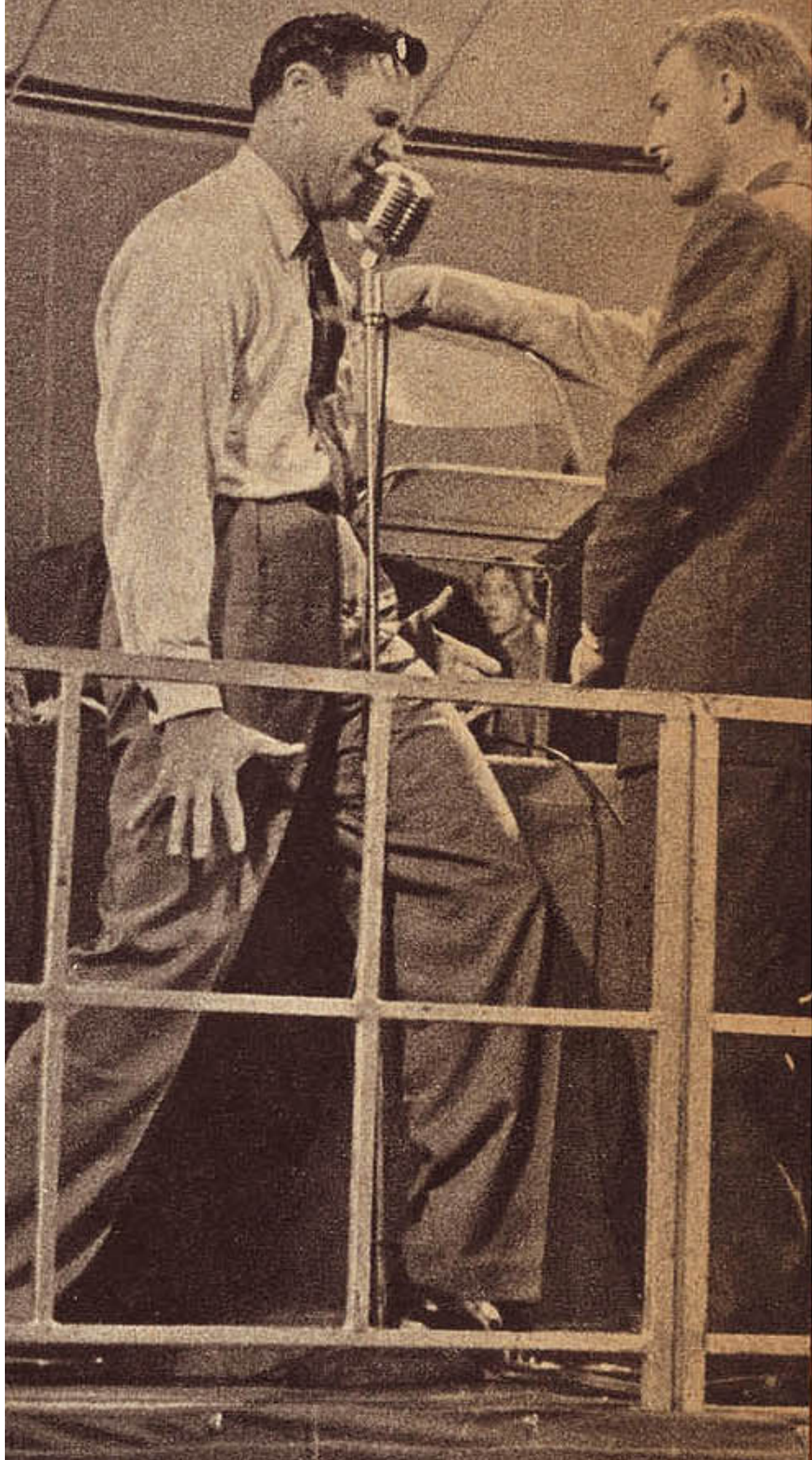
His parents, he recalls, practically had to carry him up to the preacher, who said a short prayer commanding disease to leave him, in the name of Jesus Christ.

"Something struck my lungs, and I began tingling throughout my entire body," Roberts says. "A beautiful light engulfed me, and the next thing I knew, I was running back and forth on the big platform with my hands upraised, shouting at the top of my voice, 'I am healed! I am healed! I am healed!'"

Within two months, Roberts himself became a preacher. And the ex-stutterer is now a talker of the first order.

Oral Roberts and his wife Evelyn, a former Texas schoolteacher, have traveled a long way toward what they consider his destiny of saving souls for God on a worldwide basis. He is president and she secretary of Healing Waters, Inc., the corporation that forms the Oral Roberts organization. (Despite its name, he uses no "healing water" in his services. And when he dies,

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"God's power surges through my hand."

its assets will go to retired ministers of the Pentecostal Holiness, Church of God and Assembly of God denominations.)

For several years Mrs. Roberts worked regularly in the organization, but now most of her time is taken up with their four children: Rebecca, 15; Ronnie, 11; Richard, 7; and Roberta, 5. They live about 14 miles south of Tulsa on their 240-acre Robin Hood farm, where Roberts is raising Aberdeen Angus cattle.

Once, he had to call on God to ward off illness in his own family. "It was about three years ago," he recalls. "I was flying home from a campaign and Richard became sick. When I walked in, he had a high fever and his leg was drawing up. We thought he had polio.

"I picked him up in my arms and prayed for him. I told God I had been out working for Him, trying to save other people, and I didn't think it was fair for my own son to be stricken. I prayed for about ten

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minutes; then the fever left and the drawing in the leg stopped.”

His healing “miracles” do not come at will, for Roberts admits that he doesn’t always carry God’s power in his hand. “If I could bring healing to 25 per cent of those who ask for it, I’d be the happiest man in the world,” he says. “When I have the power I can feel it surging through my right hand.”

A big man, Oral Roberts stands six feet one. He weighs 195 pounds, and usually loses five of them in a campaign. His dark hair is parted just to the left of center, and sometimes a strand or two falls on his forehead in the heat of a sermon.

He calls himself a maverick, a “rebel against convention,” and in many ways he doesn’t fit the traditional preacher mold. He frankly regards the first 12 years of his 20-year ministry as wasted. Those were the years before he received the evangelistic call to save and heal. Saving souls comes first, he insists; healing the sick is secondary.

When Roberts is working in a campaign, he retires alone to his hotel room every afternoon about three to write his sermon. He constructs it point by point on a portable writing board in his lap, a clock before him.

“Its ticking seems to keep time as a spiritual transformation occurs, Roberts says. “I become anointed with God’s word and the spirit of the Lord builds up in me like a coiled spring. By the time I’m ready to go on, my mind is razor-sharp. I know exactly what I’m going to say and I’m feeling like a lion.”

At the meeting, when he signals that he is ready, an assistant announces him, and Roberts strides briskly through a door behind the speaker’s platform, carrying his Bible. An organ peals out his theme song, “Where the Healing Waters Flow.”

Roberts leads the singing, grabbing the microphone by the throat as if it were a demon. When the hymn is over, he shouts to his listeners, “Do you love the Lord tonight?”

They reply, “Amen!”

“Do you love Him with all your heart?”

There is another: “Amen!”

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“Do you love Him with all your heart?”

There is another: “Amen!”

“Put up your hands and tell Him how much you love Him!”

Every hand goes up and on this rising tide of emotion Roberts takes over.

While he delivers a supercharged message that may last two hours, he is a man possessed. He plays his congregation like a symphony conductor. His voice crackles and blasts. His eyes flash and his expressive hands punctuate the words that rush from him in a torrent.

The sermon blends into the altar call—the summons to sinners to come forward and be saved. Throughout, the evangelist keeps an eye on the television camera, asking those at home to raise their hands, sing or pray along with the tent congregation. And when he has finished the soul-saving, he asks all repenting sinners in the TV audience to write him.

Some of the sick and injured are unable to come forward and now he goes to a special tent to pray for them. When he returns, Roberts takes off his coat and seats himself on a chair in front of his congregation. Behind him are local ministers who are sponsoring his campaign. Then the parade of the sick begins, and he tries to pray for each one, even on nights when he doesn't have the “power.” Many are in a state of near-hysteria by the time they reach him.

Roberts acknowledges that some of the apparent “cures” in the tent are only temporary. But he can point to others who have written after two or three years to tell him that their healing has lasted. He is careful to state that he believes in medical science; he says those who come to him have already tried medicine.

After the service, he is literally limp. “I'm all played out,” he describes himself. “I just want to get off and be by myself long enough to recover from the strain.”

Asked recently if he feels any sense of rivalry with his fellow revivalist, Billy Graham, Roberts replied, “No, we're not in the same field. Graham is pricking the conscience of mankind with his hell fire

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After his supercharged sermons, the parade of the sick begins. In special tent he prays for the totally disabled, then returns to the healing line in the main tent.

and brimstone. I think he's doing a good job. But I'm in another realm, emphasizing the love and goodness of God."

Roberts keeps a close check on the finances of Healing Waters and has been known to count the offering personally at his services. Most of the decisions entailing large sums are his.

As a businessman-preacher, for example, he recently ordered a million copies of a religious comic book to be distributed in many parts of the world. He feels religion can be sold to great masses of people like any other "product." And he is a man in a hurry, for as he said not long ago, "I can't have any slow horses on my team and save a million souls a year."

Most of his life he has had to scrimp and he believes that now he can travel first-class. He dresses well, with a flair for sporty two-toned outfits, and drives a good car.

"God doesn't run a breadline," he explains. "I make no apology for buying the best we can afford. The old idea that religious people should be poor is nonsense. I think the millionaires of the world should be the people who are living right."

Healing Waters publishes *America's Healing Magazine*, a monthly, with more than 435,000 subscribers, and sells thousands of copies of Roberts' books, including his autobiography. The corporation has bought 175 acres of land at Tulsa for a new headquarters to be known as "City of Faith." The land was reported to cost some \$250,000.

All this was made possible by a preacher who arrived in Tulsa in 1946 with \$25 in his pocket. But Roberts is far from satisfied. His goal is a yearly budget of \$4,000,000 which he believes will enable him

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to be on 200 TV and 500 radio stations once a week.

Currently, Healing Waters has a payroll of about \$35,000 a month and each 10-day campaign is budgeted at \$20,000. Roberts draws a salary from the organization, in addition to the "love offering" taken up for his family one night out of the ten in each campaign.

Most of the corporation's employees are women, nearly half of them hired to handle mail. (Six out of ten letters received contain money, but Roberts says non-donors are given equal consideration.) Employees must be Christians and must not use tobacco. There is a ban on cosmetics and "modesty" in dress is a must.

Employees start every workday with group prayer. Monday through Thursday there is five minutes of singing and praying for the program and its supporters; and Friday a 30-minute get-together, usually featuring one of Roberts' TV films or a sermon.

If a visitor asks a Healing Waters girl what she is doing, the answer is supposed to be, "I'm winning souls." One day Roberts decided to demonstrate this to a guest. "Pick out a girl," he urged, "and ask her what she's doing."

About that time a young stenographer came by and Roberts stopped her himself. "What are you doing?" he asked meaningfully.

The girl looked at him as though this was the silliest question of the day. "I just finished lunch," she said.

The evangelist put on successful campaigns in the Holy Land and South Africa last year, and is planning to preach soon in Korea, the Philippines and Australia. He sees almost no limit to the souls that can be saved through the "World Outreach" plan. There is talk of publishing Healing Waters material in 50 languages.

Among Roberts' more outspoken critics are ministers of the Church of Christ, who believe no man has divine healing power and that Roberts' performance is a "sham and hoax," preying on ignorance. In several cities they have publicly offered \$1,000 reward for proof of

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“miraculous divine healing.” At Phoenix, Arizona, they left printed cards on automobiles that were parked at Roberts’ revival grounds. “Oral Roberts,” said the cards, “will you meet us in public discussion?”

Roberts ignores all this. “I’m so busy ministering to people who do believe that I see no sense in devoting time to those who don’t,” he says. “I’m not quarreling with anybody . . . I just promote my product.”

He is more interested in people like the young woman whose boy friend, sitting beside her at a Roberts meeting, refused to be saved and mocked her until she could stand it no longer. “All right,” she said firmly, “if you won’t go to heaven with me, I’m not going to hell with you!” And with that she moved up front and “gave her heart to God.”



In Roberts’ revival of emphasis on Christian healing there are no bars to age or race.