

IN MEMORIAM  
REV. JOHN H. RUBLE, DIED APRIL 14, 1836

BY REV. R. E. HARVEY

Religion, morality and knowledge are necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind.—Edgar R. Harlan.

The pioneer preachers did more than all other forces combined to shape the character and create the standards of the growing civilization of the West.—Theodore Roosevelt.

\* The foregoing quotations render an apology needless for a centenary tribute to the first resident minister of the gospel in southern Iowa; who was also the first clergyman to marry, die and be buried within our borders.

He was not the first preacher to visit the region named, but his predecessors, in ministering to the incoming settlers of this part of the Black Hawk Purchase, merely extended fields of labor in adjoining states to include this newest outpost of civilization, while his parish was exclusively on Iowa soil. The story of his assignment portrays the aggressiveness of the frontier churches in providing the means of grace for the advancing waves of population, and likewise affords an amusing glimpse of the holy rivalry amongst the ministry for the foremost posts on the skirmish line of the armies of the Lord.

The first Methodist services in the south half of Iowa were held by Barton H. Cartwright, a local preacher attached to the Henderson River Mission in Illinois, who in March, 1834, was commissioned by his famous kinsman, Peter Cartwright, presiding elder of Quincy District, Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, to preach and organize societies in the Flint Hills settlements. In pursuance of which mandate there was formed at Burlington, in the residence of Dr. William R. Ross on April 18 of that year, a church organization which contests with two others the honor of being the first to be effected in Iowa.

Young Cartwright preached on Sundays throughout the region, supporting himself at breaking prairie and other tasks on week days. Meantime the Missouri Conference of the same denomina-

tion directed J. H. Jamison to extend his vast circuit in the north-eastern corner of that state by doing missionary work amongst the white and red occupants of the lower Des Moines valley, on which errand he visited Burlington in July, 1834, co-operated with Barton Cartwright in his services and, evidently regarding him as only a voluntary evangelist, reported the Flint Hills work as part of his own field when his conference held its annual session and was reappointed thereto; the circuit including six counties in Missouri and all of the Black Hawk Purchase south of Rock Island.

The Missouri Methodists held their conference in September, while the Illinois unit did not meet till October, when Elder Cartwright protested that the Missouri brethren "have jumped my Iowa claim." Jumping of land claims was one of the cardinal offenses on the frontier, and usually received condign punishment, but the ecclesiastical transgression was dealt with in less sanguinary fashion, especially as Bishop Roberts, who presided in both conferences, had already sanctioned the arrangement, so the Illinois dignitary could only voice his grievance and bide his time.

Mr. Jamison made only one round of his charge after reappointment, and then went east to be married; he was succeeded by L. B. Stateler under whose zealous ministrations the work expanded so rapidly that in the September, 1835, session of the Missouri Conference, Bishop Roberts set off Iowa Methodism into an independent circuit named "Burlington," and called for a volunteer to man this newest outpost of the church militant. To this challenge there came the immediate response "Here am I! Send me!" from a young preacher of twenty-six years who had just been ordained deacon and admitted into full membership in the conference.

John H. Ruble was the son of devout parents, and was converted in his early teens, but on coming of age fled from his Tennessee home to escape a call to the ministry. The voice of duty, however, followed him to his Illinois refuge and, yielding to the heavenly vision, he received local preacher's license from the presiding elder of Sangamon District, the Rev. Simon Peter; wherefore he may be said to have been in the regular apostolic succession!

Removing to Missouri, young Ruble labored first as pastor's assistant, then was received on trial and after two years on the White River Mission in the wilds of Arkansas, was assigned, as we have seen, to the yet wilder prairies of Iowa. The young missionary brought to his task a fine mind which he assiduously cultivated, a genteel appearance and affable manners, all of which were reinforced by a devout demeanor which compelled even skeptics to admit, "Ruble is what he professes to be," and endeared him to his parishioners. Being gifted in song, fervent in prayer and of ready utterance, his energetic application of Scripture to the hearts and consciences of his hearers evoked enthusiastic response from his impressionable congregations.

Burlington Circuit extended from river to river covering practically the same territory now comprising the Iowa-Des Moines Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church; but at that date the only portion open to white settlement was the strip fifty miles wide along the west bank of the Mississippi, extending from the Missouri state line to the Iowa River, where a reserve had been assigned the Sac chieftain, Keokuk, in consideration for his influence in keeping most of his tribe at home during the Black Hawk War. What was left, however, included three modern counties with portions of three or four more, all forming Des Moines County of Michigan Territory—ample field enough for any man to traverse every four weeks.

Mr. Ruble was accompanied on his first round by Jonathan King of New London, without whose pilotage he would have been as helpless in the waving seas of grass separating the sparse settlements, as would have been a prairie dweller amidst the White River forests from which he had so recently come. Nor was this the only peril to be faced. According to the season of the year, capricious nature blockaded the dim trails with miry swamps and mountainous snow drifts; the bridgeless, fordless streams were filled with roaring floods or choking ice floes; flaming thunder storms and blinding blizzards swept the wide open spaces, while in spring and autumn prairie fires lurked in ambush like red Indians. But what of it? Others braved all these perils in hope of gain; should God's messenger dare less to save souls?

In all these wide borders there was not a single house of worship. A few of the more ambitious villages boasted log struc-



tures which served alike for educational, religious and judicial purposes, but most of the services were held in private homes, usually one-room cabins, where planks, laid across chairs or blocks of wood, functioned for pews. One of the more pretentious of these, the double log cabin of George Leebrick, in Burlington, housed the first quarterly meeting held by Presiding Elder Henry Monroe from St. Louis, November 21-23, in which the sermon was interrupted by the building catching fire from the huge blaze kindled in the great chimney. The green house logs, however, proved such poor heat conductors that the congregation, resolving itself into a volunteer fire department, soon extinguished the conflagration, after which the service resumed its normal course.

The itinerary of Burlington Circuit is of interest, for it designates the population centers of a century ago, although some of the place names may be no longer familiar to the local residents except from their proximity to towns established long afterward.

Burlington; Tamatown Prairie, six miles north of Burlington; Casey Prairie, two miles further north; Springfield's, near Dodgeville; Yellow Spring, near Kossuth; Hobb's, three miles east of New London; Samuel C. Read's, on the Des Moines four miles above Farmington; Clark's Point, four miles north of West Point; Pitman's, two miles east of West Point on the Fort Madison road; Fort Madison; Augusta; Sand Ridge, on the Fort Madison-Burlington road; and Mount Pleasant, a hamlet of three houses, where Mr. Ruble was the pioneer preacher, delivering the first sermon in the home of Pressley Saunders.

These were the regular Sunday preaching stations. On week days, and nights, the circuit rider preached wherever a group of people could be assembled, and his labors were supplemented by the activities of local preachers, exhorters and classleaders, unpaid lay workers; a combination of effort which covered the entire region with a network of Methodist societies.

There was compensation for the hardships encountered in the cordial hospitality which everywhere greeted the traveling ministers, regardless of creed or denomination, for the hardy frontiersmen gladly shared food and shelter with those who broke to them the bread of life eternal. The salaries were scantier even than the entertainment, for silver and gold there was none, and the few bank notes which drifted in from the older states were

usually worthless, but such as they had was willingly divided with the heralds of the cross. It was by this co-operation of effort that religion came to pervade the entire social life of the primitive commonwealth, so that few portions of the West were freer of the crime and violence usually prevalent along a raw frontier.

There were other compensations: youth and beauty were drawn together by the same mystic chords vibrating everywhere, and that he might bestow the church's blessing upon the culmination of love's young dreams, the young minister obtained the legal authority required by the code in force from his faithful parishioner, the pioneer physician and merchant of Burlington, who was also the first clerk of the courts.

Territory of Michigan, Des Moines County:—Know all men by these presents, that John H. Ruble is hereby permitted to solemnize marriages in the county of Des Moines. This 21st of October, 1835. William R. Ross, C. C. D. C.<sup>1</sup>

And being of like fiber with the young life about him, the roseate splendor of romance fell across the preacher's pathway. In Mount Pleasant he met and fell in love with Diana, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Bowen, people prominent in both church and community. The wedding took place in Burlington, the county seat, probably because there was no one nearer with authority to perform the ceremony. It was in January, 1836, that the union transpired and the newlyweds returned to Mount Pleasant where they designed making their home, but fate ordered otherwise.

While on his monthly round of the circuit (in which he was accompanied by his bride, using the two-wheeled sulky, most suitable vehicle for the ill-kept highways of the times) Mr. Ruble was stricken down by influenza and lay ill for two weeks in the home of Sullivan Ross, brother of the doctor, where he passed away on April 14. The final summons came unexpectedly but found him not unready. Having long prayer that he might "go up with a shout," it was now granted him to meet the last enemy with a triumphant "The Will of God be done! Welcome, Death, I am prepared to go!"

The funeral discourse on April 15 was delivered by the eloquent Peter Borein of Quincy, Illinois, from the text, John 5:

<sup>1</sup>Copy of the certificate given by the clerk of court of Des Moines County to Rev. John H. Ruble.

28-29. With a reputation as scholar, gentleman and Christian commanding universal respect, and gifted with a musical voice and handsome personality, such a preacher on such an occasion could not fail to make a deep impression upon the very large audience who listened to his interpretation of the resurrection and eternal judgment. The interment took place at Burlington, but some time later the widow removed the remains to Mount Pleasant where they repose awaiting the great awakening.

Peter Cartwright promptly improved the opportunity to repossess his "Iowa claim" by sending two aggressive itinerants to supply the vacancy on Burlington Circuit; one of them, Daniel Cartwright, brother to Barton already mentioned, took the region north of Burlington; while Peter Borein's cousin, Wilson Pitner, a genius more eccentric than Peter Cartwright himself, ranged from Burlington to the Missouri line. No further contest over title seems to have occurred, for Iowa Methodism remained under the fostering care of its parent state, Illinois, until attaining to conference status in its own right.



Monument to Rev. John H. Ruble erected in a cemetery at Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in 1858 by the Iowa Conference of the M. E. Church.



John Ruble's grave remained unmarked until 1858 when the Iowa Conference placed at his head the marble monument shown in the accompanying cut. The date of death there given was probably supplied from memory by the purchasing committee, and is in error. That given in this sketch comes from the minutes of the Missouri Conference. Time having wrought the ravages indicated on this memento, the Iowa-Des Moines Conference, at its 1933 session, on motion of Rev. W. A. Longnecker, historian of the old Iowa Conference, voted a more lasting memorial which was procured, largely through the diligent activity of Dr. Longnecker. It consists of a granite boulder, bearing a bronze tablet whereon appears the record of the life and death of the man who sleeps below. It stands at the foot of the grave, facing Highway No. 161.

Here on September 18, 1934, most of the ministers of the Iowa-Des Moines Conference, together with many lay members from Mount Pleasant and elsewhere, assembled for the dedication exercises, which were the first feature of the annual conference session in which the centenary anniversary of the first Methodist Episcopal Church in Burlington was duly commemorated.

Rev. W. A. Longnecker presided in the services at the grave, using a gavel made of wood from Barrett's Chapel in Delaware where Bishops Coke and Asbury held their first consultation relative to the organization of American Methodism. The opening prayer was offered by Rev. Thomas P. Potter of the Upper Iowa Conference, Rev. R. C. Buchanan read a historical sketch prepared by the author of this paper, Rev. R. M. Shipman delivered an address dealing with the contrasts of a century in the character and difficulties of the preacher's work, Rev. F. C. Witzigman pronounced the prayer of consecration, and Rev. D. J. Shenton gave the benediction. The hymns used were "Faith of Our Fathers," and "A Charge to Keep I Have," the latter undoubtedly sung by John H. Ruble and his log cabin congregations. May his devotion to duty and spirit of consecration descend upon all, both ministers and laymen, who tread the paths he marked out a hundred years ago.

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