

THE PALIMPSEST

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The First Church in Iowa

On the sixth day of November, 1833, a Methodist circuit rider named Barton Randle crossed the Mississippi River and entered upon his pastoral duties at Dubuque. It was no chance visit. The mines of Julien Dubuque and his Indian friends had scarcely been opened to settlement before the vigilant eye of the militant frontier preacher, Peter Cartwright, was upon the infant village. At the Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in September, 1833, he urged that provision be made for carrying the gospel beyond the Mississippi, and Barton Randle and John T. Mitchell were assigned to the "Galena and Debukue mission". Between them it was decided that Mitchell should make his headquarters at Galena while Randle was to establish himself in Dubuque.

This itinerant preacher, a Georgian by birth, saw before him a straggling collection of log cabins and

frame shanties. The streets were roughly laid out and were without lights, paving, or sidewalks. There were neither churches nor public schools. The settlers, some three or four hundred in number, were a heterogeneous group drawn together chiefly by the hope of acquiring wealth at the mines.

Randle's first religious service was held on the evening of his arrival in what was known as the Bell Tavern, kept by Jesse M. Harrison on the site now occupied by the Hotel Julien Dubuque. Of this service — the first held by a Methodist minister in what is now Iowa — no report appears.

The tavern, however, proved to be unsatisfactory both as a meeting place for religious services and as a home for the preacher, so better accommodations were sought. But the "only place they could procure at Dubuque for regular worship was a small, inconvenient room over a grocery, the entrance to which was by a rickety stairs outside. While the few above were engaged in singing, praying, and speaking to one another of the good things of God, those in the grocery below were drinking, cursing, quarrelling, and fighting."

In the meantime the preacher, who seems to have been a bachelor, secured for himself a shanty like those of the miners where he could pray, think, and read, and where he could have his own "boughten feed". He did not, however, neglect his parish for the comforts of his cabin. With his horse, saddlebags, and Bible he held services throughout the

region wherever two or three people could be gathered together.

Early in March, 1834, some devout women, including Mrs. Woodbury Massey, Mrs. Ezekiel Lockwood, and Mrs. Susan A. Dean, organized a union Sunday school and on April 24th the first Methodist prayer meeting in Iowa was held at the home of John Johnson, a Methodist who had located in Dubuque not long before. The next step was the organization of a Methodist class on the 18th of May, the first regular class meeting — a service now largely discontinued by Methodist Episcopal churches — being held on the first of June with John Johnson as class leader.

During this first winter Reverend Randle seems to have preached at various places in the vicinity, usually holding services in Dubuque every fourth week. But though he could, and did, preach “anywhere”, he preferred a church building and in the spring of 1834 the little group of Methodists at Dubuque decided to erect a meeting house, being “encouraged thereto, by some friendly sinners”. The original subscription paper for this humble structure, which is now in the possession of the State Historical Society of Iowa, reads as follows:

“Subscription for a Chapel for the Methodist Episcopal Church, in the Town of Dubuque.

“Plan of the house. — To be built of hewn logs; 20 by 26 feet in the clear; one story, 10 feet high; lower & upper floors; shingled roof; pointed with

lime & sand; one batten door; four 20 light & one 12 light windows — cost estimated for completing in good plain style \$255.00. The above house is built for the use of the Methodist Episcopal Church — but when not occupied by said Church, shall be open for Divine service by other Christian Denominations; and may be used for a common school, at the discretion of the Trustees. Woodbury Massey, John Johnson, Wm. Hillery, Marcus Atchison, and Orin Smith are the board of trustees, who are authorized to receive subscriptions and control the interests of said house, for the uses above mentioned.”

Below this are the names of seventy donors, their subscriptions ranging from \$25 by Woodbury Massey to twelve and one-half cents by Caroline Brady — perhaps the widow's mite. The signatures are somewhat faded and some of them are difficult to decipher, but a study of the list reveals the cosmopolitan character of Dubuque's population. Only three or four were members of the Methodist Church. Three names are followed by the word “collered”, two of these donating twenty-five cents each and the third fifty cents. Another contribution of fifty cents is credited to “Uncle Tom”. Was he a kindly black man, the forerunner of the Uncle Tom of Harriet Beecher Stowe? All the negro subscribers are said to have been slaves. From the names on the list only three women seem to have contributed. Apparently Reverend Randle

had not yet organized a "Ladies Aid". One of the three was Tilda, a slave woman and a sister of Ralph Montgomery whose fight for freedom constitutes the first case in the printed reports of the Iowa Supreme Court.

Many countries were represented on the list, if names may be taken as evidence of nationality. One contributor appears as "Nigley, a dutchman"; Duplissey, on the other hand, was apparently French; while the origin of Patrick O'Mora requires no discussion. Philip Jacob Weigel, written in German script, seems also self-explanatory. Among the names on the list are those of Woodbury Massey, Warner Lewis, Ezekiel Lockwood, L. H. Langworthy, Milo H. Prentice, and Eliphalet Price, men who became leaders in the community.

That the collection of this money required considerable effort on the part of the faithful few is evident from an anecdote related by Mr. Price. "About the first of August, 1834," he writes, "we, with some five or six other young men, were assisting Mr. Davis Grafford to raise one corner of his log house out of the cellar, into which it had fallen. While thus engaged, Mr. Johnson, an old man who was much respected by the citizens of Dubuque, and who was known to be a member of the Methodist denomination, came up and asked if we would subscribe something toward the building of a church — and went on to describe the size of the building, and to say that it was to be used for a school house also.

One of the young men said he would give a dollar towards building a gambling house, but nothing for a church. Johnson, who had but one eye, had on a broad-brimmed hat, greasy and much worn; his beard was apparently of a week's growth, and he was accompanied by a swarm of flies, which when he stood still, settled down upon the legs of his pantaloons and the arms of his coat, to luxuriate upon the molasses and other grocery-store sweets that glistened upon these parts of his wardrobe. Throwing his head and person back so as to enable him to fix his one-eyed gaze upon us from beneath the broad rim of his hat that lopped down in front, he observed, with a smile on his countenance, and in a mild and pleasant tone of voice:

“‘You are all young men, who, I have no doubt, have been raised by Christian parents. Many of you may live to raise families in the “Purchase;” and if such should be the case, I am confident that none of you will blush when you tell your children that you helped to build the first church in the Black Hawk Purchase.’

“For two or three minutes nothing was said upon either side, when the young man who proposed to aid in the building of a gambling house observed, ‘Old hoss, here’s a dollar.’

“All the others gave from fifty cents to a dollar.”

In addition to the money collected at Dubuque a little more than sixty dollars was donated in St. Louis to aid in building the new church. Permission

to use a lot for the building was secured from Thomas C. Legate, the superintendent in charge of the Upper Mississippi Lead Mines, for the land was not yet on sale.

Work was begun on the primitive church building on June 23, 1834, and on July 25th, John Johnson, who kept a diary, records the fact that they "raised the meeting-house with a few hands and without spirits of any kind"—a deviation from the usual custom of providing refreshments at such affairs. The building occupied a site now forming the south-east corner of Washington Square and apparently faced south. It was completed in about four weeks and was dedicated by a "two days meeting".

The membership of the new church was made up of twelve persons, five men and seven women—John Johnson, Susan Johnson, Woodbury Massey, Susan Massey, Robert Bell, William Hillery, Susan A. Dean, Abigail Wilder, Mary Ann Jordan, Patrick Smith, Frances Anderson, and Charlotte Morgan, a colored sister. Some accounts have Maria Massey on the list instead of Susan Massey, while at least one list gives both, making thirteen members.

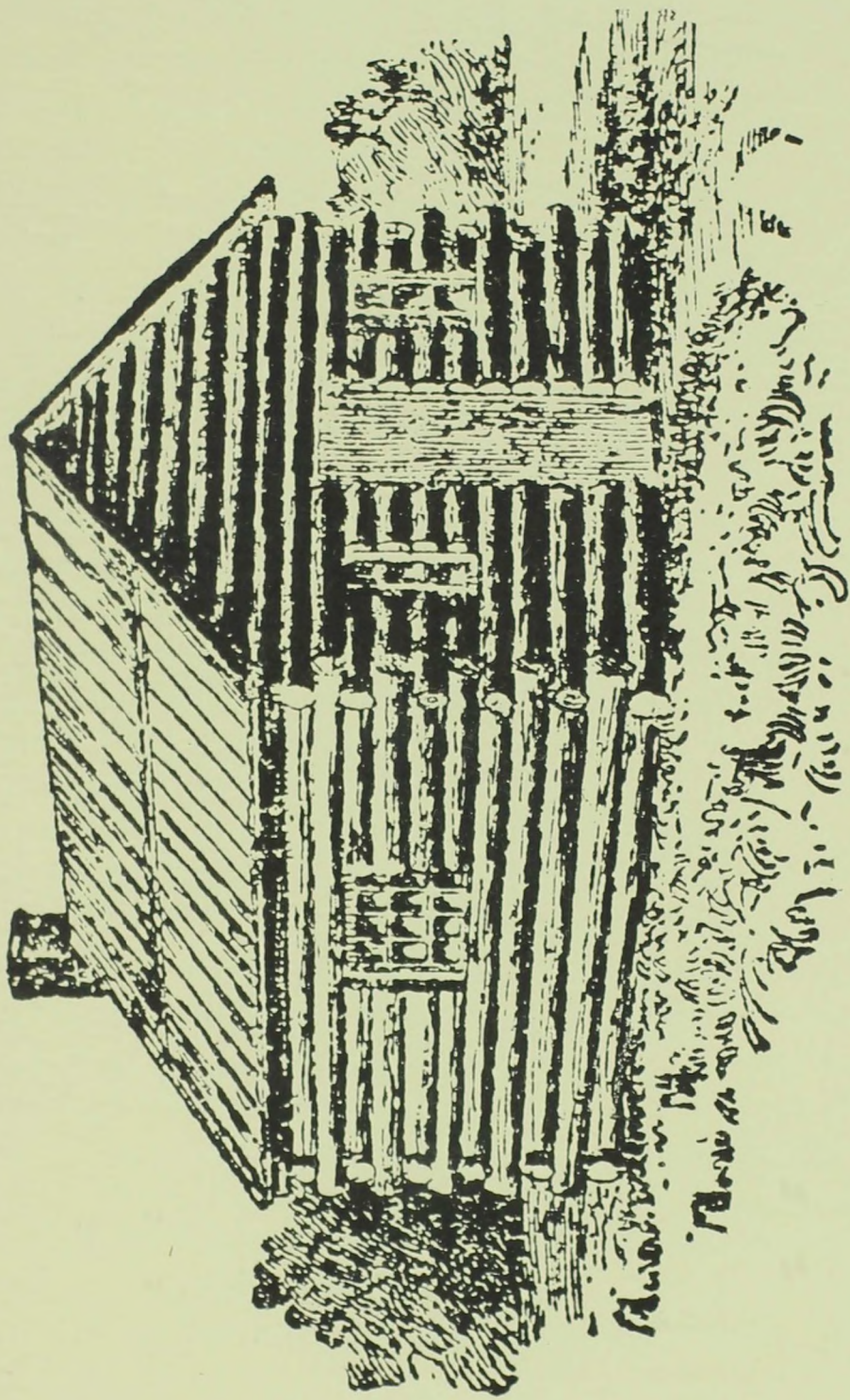
On the twenty-third of August, 1834, the first Methodist quarterly meeting in Iowa was held in this log building, and the church organization was complete—class meeting, Sunday school, prayer meeting, preaching service, and quarterly conference. With pardonable pride, Barton Randle, the missionary preacher, exclaimed, "Well done, to

collect money, build a splendid log meeting house, and pay for it, hold a two days meeting, and receive twelve members, all in a few weeks. O, it was the Lord's doings, let Him have the Glory."

Randle, like most of the pioneer preachers, soon left for other fields, preaching his last sermon in Dubuque on August 10, 1834. For his year's work he received the sum of one hundred dollars, ten dollars of which was said to have been contributed by a gambler.

About the first of October the appearance of a Mormon missionary threatened to cause trouble for the struggling church. Soon after his arrival the report was circulated about Dubuque that the Methodists had the key to the building and would not permit the Mormon elder to preach in it. A crowd of young men — apparently hoping for some excitement — accompanied the Mormon to the church, where a number of persons had already collected around the door, which was locked. A man forced his way through the crowd, stuck his bowie knife in the door and said: "I helped to build this church, and I'll be damned if it shan't be free to all denominations." Just then some one came forward and unlocked the door and the Mormon missionary was permitted to deliver his exhortation — with what success we are not informed.

The second preacher at the Dubuque church was Nicholas S. Bastion, who, in addition to his pastoral duties and his circuit appointments, organized a day



THE FIRST CHURCH IN IOWA

FROM A DRAWING REPRODUCED ON THE DEDICATION PROGRAM
OF ST. LUKE'S METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF DUBUQUE

school in the log church. One morning he found that the building had been entered and robbed of the books. Investigation revealed the fact that it was not thirst for knowledge which actuated the thief: he had sold the stolen books to buy whisky. There being no civil magistrate in Dubuque at this time, the thief was tried by an informal jury of citizens, sentenced to restore the books, and to be conducted out of town to the tune of "The Rogue's March". Moreover, he was informed that if he returned he would be given a hundred lashes. At the end of the year Reverend Bastion reported to the conference a membership of forty in the Dubuque church.

Reverend Bastion was followed by H. W. Reed who brought his young wife to his frontier station. He remained in Dubuque for two years, and in the fall of 1837 his place was filled by Wellington Weigley. Two other ministers served in the log church building — Garrett G. Worthington and I. I. Stewart, during whose ministry a new church was built.

Several terms of court, under the jurisdiction of Michigan Territory, of which Iowa was then a part, are said to have been held in the old log church. There also was held a meeting to consider the incorporation of the town of Dubuque. In the spring of 1836, Mrs. Caroline Dexter taught school in the church building, giving instruction in writing, arithmetic, and needlework.

And so the first church building in Iowa, con-

structed through the sacrifice of public spirited citizens of Dubuque — both bond and free — began to function as a center of religion, education, and law. By 1839, however, it had been outgrown, and when the Methodist Church at Dubuque considered plans for the celebration of the centenary of Methodism, it was decided to build a new church to be known as the Wesleyan Centenary Church. This structure was erected on the northwest corner of Seventh and Locust streets, just a block north of the old log church, on a lot donated by J. P. Farley, a son-in-law of the pioneer, John Johnson. The new church was ready for use in 1840 and the old building was abandoned. Later it was moved to a site near the corner of Bluff and Dodge streets, covered with clapboards, and used as a dwelling.

In the course of a few years, the Centenary Church was also outgrown, and in 1853 a new building was erected on the west side of Main Street between Eleventh and Twelfth streets. The Main Street Church was later remodelled and served until 1895 when it was torn down to make room for the new St. Luke's Methodist Episcopal Church, which cost almost \$100,000, and has a seating capacity of fifteen hundred. This church, dedicated on May 16, 1897, is the lineal descendant and worthy successor of the first church in Iowa — the old church with its log walls, batten door, rude seats, and its twelve members.

RUTH A. GALLAHER