

The Circuit Riders

There is much interest today in displaced persons — the millions uprooted and sent into strange lands by war, racial hatred, or religious persecution. Over a century ago, Iowa was the Mecca for thousands of displaced persons, not victims of oppression or prejudice but self-reliant pioneers. They had seen a vision of a new home where the soil was more fertile, land was cheaper, and life more democratic. They sold their houses and lands, if such they owned, disposed of the chattels which could not be transported, loaded their treasured belongings and their families into wagons or boats, and set their faces westward, "bound for Iowa." They left behind advantages enjoyed in the older communities — stores, schools, and churches.

Gradually there filtered into the new Iowa settlements teachers, physicians, lawyers, merchants, bankers, priests, and ministers. In the forefront came the Methodist circuit riders — men who had dedicated their lives to preaching the gospel. On horseback or on foot, with a Bible, a hymnal, a copy of the *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and a change of raiment in their saddlebags or knapsacks, these men kept pace with the

onrushing frontier. Usually they found food and lodging in the crowded cabins. Sometimes they slept on the ground; sometimes they were compelled to swim the rivers and flooded creeks; sometimes they encountered blizzards or thunderstorms. But nothing stopped them long.

Their chief purpose was to preach salvation to those who accepted Christ and his teachings, but they also performed marriage ceremonies, held burial rites for the dead, comforted the survivors, and reprimanded those who did not live according to their profession. In a land where men and women had to depend largely on their own efforts for survival, where pestilence and danger threatened, where life was full of hard work and solitude, the circuit riders were welcome guests. They brought the message of God's help and love and forgiveness and offered the promise of rest and security in the future life.

The organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church was well suited to work among pioneers. The societies which John Wesley had formed in England and which were continued in America were informal organizations supervised and instructed by itinerant preachers and shepherded by class leaders. As the societies multiplied, circuits were formed and preachers were appointed to visit them as often as they could make the rounds.

Of whom was this vanguard of the church made up? The circuit riders were common men, some-

times almost illiterate men, but wise in the wisdom of the frontier and willing to sacrifice wealth and comfort at the call of duty. They believed sincerely that persons who did not accept and follow the New Testament way of salvation, as they understood it, would be condemned to everlasting punishment. They felt keenly the burden of saving souls from a Hell which they envisioned clearly and described graphically. They were also socially conscious leaders — men who taught the practical virtues of honesty, generosity, kindness, and morality. For those who accepted Christ and fulfilled the obligations of a Christian life they described a Heaven of light, rest, and plenty, with golden streets, where the fortunate ones constantly rejoiced in the presence of God.

The godfather of Iowa Methodism was Peter Cartwright, a dynamic leader of circuit riding preachers. Born in Amherst County, Virginia, on September 1, 1785, Cartwright preached in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois, but his hand reached out to the new parish across the Mississippi. Converted at sixteen, he became a Methodist, soon began to "exhort," and in 1806 was ordained as an elder. Shrewd and fearless, equally ready to pray or to fight, at first knowing few books except the Bible, Peter Cartwright was, in many ways, typical of the frontier preachers. His *Autobiography*, written in 1856, mentions only one visit to Iowa and the date of that is not given. Eye-

witnesses, however, have stated that it took place in the summer of 1834. Cartwright describes a two-day meeting held near Burlington, then a place with only a few cabins, not one of which could hold the people who came. The congregation and the preachers repaired to a near-by grove.

Cartwright described this meeting in his *Autobiography*:

Years before this time an old tree had fallen down across a small sapling and bent it near the earth. The sapling was not killed, and the top of it shot up straight beside the tree that had fallen on it, and it had grown for years in this condition. The old tree had been cut off, and they scalped the bark off of that part of the sapling, that lay parallel with the ground. They drove a stake down, and nailed a board to it, and the top of the sapling that grew erect, and this was my handboard, and I stood on that part of the sapling that lay near and level with the ground. This was my pulpit, from which I declared the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we had a good meeting.

Cartwright also gives a nostalgic picture of the change that had come over the Methodist Church during his lifetime.

The Methodists in that early day dressed plain; attended their meetings faithfully, especially preaching, prayer and class meetings; they wore no jewelry, no ruffles; they would frequently walk three or four miles to class meetings, and home again, on Sundays; they would go thirty or forty miles to their quarterly meetings, and think it a glorious privilege to meet their presiding elder, and the

rest of the preachers. They would, nearly every soul of them, sing our hymns and spiritual songs. They religiously kept the Sabbath day. . . . The Methodists of that day stood up and faced their preacher when they sung; they kneeled down in the public congregation as well as elsewhere when the preacher said, "Let us pray." There was no standing among the members in time of prayer; especially the abominable practice of sitting down during that exercise was unknown among early Methodists. Parents did not allow their children to go to balls or plays; they did not send them to dancing-schools. . . . But, how things have changed for the worse in this educational age of the world.

It was Peter Cartwright, presiding over the meeting of the Illinois Conference at Union Grove, Illinois, in September, 1833, who sent Barton Randle to preach at the Dubuque lead mines. John Johnson was appointed as the class leader there. Later, as presiding elder in the Quincy District of the Illinois Conference, Cartwright sent Barton H. Cartwright, possibly a cousin, to organize a Methodist class at Burlington in April, 1834; Dr. William R. Ross was appointed as the class leader.

Barton H. Cartwright was, after a fashion, conscripted into preaching. One day he walked three miles to attend a preaching service on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River opposite Flint Hills (Burlington) in Iowa. When he arrived at the cabin in which the preaching was to be held, he found Barton Randle, the preacher, ill of a

fever and lying in the loft of the cabin. Cartwright visited him and showed him his church letter. After some conversation Randle said, "There are two or three families in the grove, and they will be here today, and you must hold meeting for them." At first the young man refused, but later convictions of duty came to him and he talked to the group. That afternoon Randle handed him a license to exhort. "I went about," he says, "breaking prairie in the day-time, and talking to the people at night; they called it preaching." On March 22, 1834, Peter Cartwright licensed him to preach and sent him to the Flint Hills, "to preach and form societies, if practicable, and to report to the Church."

Desiring to be self-supporting, Barton Cartwright took with him four yoke of oxen, a breaking plow, and a load of supplies. He was described as "a young man in vigorous health, of good proportions, dressed in plain linen pants, homemade cotton vest, common shoes, without socks, with no coat, and with a common chip hat." It was later said of him that he was "a man with a big head, and a good one, a broad chest and heavy shoulders, having a mouth plentifully wide, with lungs capable of the highest degree of intonation, who could make bass enough for any congregation, and sustain a prayer-meeting to the end, and as honest as old Abe himself."

Barton Cartwright soon returned to Illinois, and

in September, 1835, his place in southeastern Iowa was taken by John H. Ruble (or Rubel), sent by the Missouri Conference. Ruble was described as good-looking, affable, and intelligent, familiar with the Scriptures, gifted in song, and fervent in prayer. His circuit had some thirteen stations, including Burlington, Yellow Springs, Farmington, Fort Madison, Augusta, and Mount Pleasant. These were the Sunday preaching centers. On week days and nights the circuit rider preached wherever he found people to listen. For most of his duties the church was the only authority needed, but legal authority was required for the solemnization of marriages. On October 31, 1835, Dr. William R. Ross, Clerk of Court of Des Moines County, Michigan Territory, authorized the young minister to perform marriage rites in that county.

In January, 1836, Ruble married Diana Bowen, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Bowen, prominent both in the community and in the church. But tragedy soon overtook this young couple. In making his monthly round of his circuit, the missionary was stricken with what was called influenza. He died on April 14, 1836, saying, "The Will of God be done! Welcome, Death, I am prepared to go!" It is said that he was the first minister to marry in the Iowa country and the first one to die and be buried there. A marker, erected in the cemetery at Mount Pleasant in 1858 and restored in 1934,

records that "Rev. John H. Rubel died May 8 A. D. 1836, age 26 years 2 mos." Apparently both the spelling of the name and the date of death were given from memory; the Missouri Conference records give the spelling as Ruble and the date as April 14.

The era of the circuit riders lasted until after the Civil War, for the frontier continued in some parts of Iowa for almost half a century. One of the later circuit riders was Mahlon Day Collins, a Friend who became a Methodist preacher. Collins was born in New York City in 1838 and lived for a time in the Quaker settlement around Salem, Iowa. Just before the Civil War began, young Collins and a companion made a trip to the gold fields in Colorado and the southwest. Upon his return to Iowa, Collins married Keturah Ann Williams, another Friend, and the couple established their home at what was known as Lotts Creek, now Livermore, in Humboldt County. At a revival in 1862 both became converted and transferred their affiliations to the Methodist Church.

Mahlon Day Collins was soon licensed as a Methodist exhorter in the Fort Dodge District of the Upper Iowa Conference. He served two years in this capacity while he studied for the ministry, improved his 160-acre farm, and preached every Sunday. In the fall of 1864 he was admitted on trial to the Des Moines Conference

and assigned to the settlement at Denison, some 150 miles from Lotts Creek. From that time on during his active ministry Collins and his family literally had no home. Two years later he was transferred to a circuit including Onawa, Smithland, Correctionville, Moingona, and Floyd's Creek — a distance of some 200 miles. In 1867 he was sent to Jefferson, a new railroad town. At the eastern point of his circuit a small Methodist group started a church. Collins and his wife sold their land on Lotts Creek and gave the money for its completion. The settlement became Collins, Iowa; the church, "Collins Chapel."

For six years the Collins family traveled on these circuits, using a two-seated surrey in summer and a bobsled in winter. During winter storms the wife and children might be protected under blankets and buffalo robes, but the minister had to face the wind and snow, often tramping ahead of the team to break a way through the drifts. Hardships took their toll in life as well as in suffering. Mary Collins, two years of age, died at Denison, and Edith, a baby daughter, died at Jefferson. Two other Collins girls, Lillian and Stella, died of scarlet fever at Boonesboro, but the work went on. Collins usually held four quarterly meetings and started at least one revival meeting each week. Camp meetings were held in the summer and fall. Prayers, songs, and exhortation, interspersed with shouts of "Amen," "Praise God," and "Hal-

"lelujah," echoed from the camp grounds. Whenever a person stood up and thereby announced his conversion, the congregation signified its joy by shouts and songs.

The good done by these self-sacrificing people cannot be computed. In spite of their lack of education, inadequate compensation, and great hardships, they made an invaluable contribution to society. Mary Carolyn Davies has written a tribute to these "minute men" of the church, the circuit riders.

God rides out on his ancient quest,
Healing, saving, commanding;
Here in the savage, unknown West;
Settlement, cabin, landing —
Well they know the steady beat,
In the stillness, of God's horses feet.

God leads to grace the pioneers,
Who walk each hour with danger;
Knows these grim men for his peers,
Gives his bread to the stranger;
Doing all that a neighbor can,
God rides still, a weary man.