

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXV ISSUED IN AUGUST 1944 No. 8

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Methodists in Conference

It was nine o'clock on the morning of August 14, 1844, when Bishop Thomas A. Morris called the Iowa Conference to order. Seated in the small brick church which had just been completed at Iowa City were members of the newly created Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It was a small group of men who faced the bishop that August morning, sitting on the hard, straight-backed pews. Roughly dressed, some perhaps still dusty and travel-stained, these frontier preachers turned their bronzed faces to the pulpit in the north end of the church. There was no organ, no stained-glass window, no choir. The rotund bishop opened his Bible to the fifth chapter of First Peter and began to read — "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder".

And while the bishop completes the reading of the message from Peter, let us turn back the pages of his life for some essential facts. Thomas A.

Morris was born in April, 1794, in what is now West Virginia, and was therefore fifty years of age, just ten years younger than the Methodist Episcopal Church. Converted at a camp-meeting at the age of nineteen, he had begun preaching in 1814. After twenty years of service as an itinerant preacher, he became editor of the *Western Christian Advocate*, one of the Methodist papers, and two years later was elected a bishop. Genial, witty, and dignified, familiar with the problems of the frontier churches, Bishop Morris had insisted on the creation of the Iowa District as part of the Illinois Conference in 1839. "We must have a district in Iowa", he had asserted, "I have passed people enough between this and Cincinnati, bound for Iowa, to form a district."

And so the Iowa District was established and Rev. Henry Summers became the presiding elder (now the district superintendent). In the following year the Illinois Conference was divided and the Iowa District, divided into the Iowa and Burlington districts, was made a part of the Rock River Conference. The Rock River Conference held the first conference in Iowa, meeting in the Centenary Church at Dubuque on August 30, 1843. The Iowa City quarterly conference invited the Rock River Conference to meet at the capital in 1844, but events changed these arrangements.

The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in New York in May, 1844. Although much of its attention was given to the schism over the slavery question, this General Conference took time to consider the needs of the western churches. Among the changes made was the creation of the Iowa Conference to include all the area within the jurisdiction of the Territory of Iowa. And here in this frontier capital Bishop Morris was presiding over its first meeting. He was to preside over three additional sessions of the Iowa Conference and over one session of the Upper Iowa Conference which was separated from the Iowa Conference in 1856.

Bishop Morris closed his Bible and announced a hymn. There was no musical accompaniment but frontier preachers were accustomed to furnishing their own music. As the singing died away, there was a scraping of heavy shoes on the uncarpeted floor as the members knelt while the bishop led in prayer, his petition no doubt accented by fervent amens.

Then came the first business of the session. Bishop Morris handed a list of the members of the Iowa Conference to Rev. Henry W. Reed (Brother Reed no doubt to that group) and asked him to call the roll. Of the seventeen members of the Rock River Conference who had charges

within the boundaries of the Iowa Conference, eleven answered "present" — Henry W. Reed, George B. Bowman, James G. Whitford, William Simpson, Isaac I. Stewart, Joseph L. Kirkpatrick, Thomas M. Kirkpatrick, Andrew Colman, David Worthington, Moses F. Shinn, and Bartholomew Weed. Fourteen younger men, their faces questioning, waited for admission to the elect circle.

Henry W. Reed was named secretary and while he was assembling materials for his records, a bar was placed across the north end of the church separating the first three rows of seats and the "amen corners" from the rest of the sanctuary which was open to visitors. It was agreed that the Conference should open each morning at nine and close at noon. Committees were appointed — one on worship, one on post offices, and a third on Sabbath schools. Isaac I. Stewart, Moses F. Shinn, and David Worthington were named Conference stewards and made up the committee on "necessitous cases". Eight men, two for each class, were named to examine candidates for ordination, but there is no record of the questions or replies.

At the second session, on August 15th, "Brother" Mitchell, agent for the Western Book Concern, a publishing subsidiary of the Methodist Church, gave his report on sales. One feature of

this session was the appointment of a committee on education, one member from each of the three districts — Burlington, Dubuque, and Des Moines. There was work for such a committee since two colleges, the Iowa City College and the Mount Pleasant Literary Institute, were already asking to be adopted. The Iowa City institution had been sponsored by the local quarterly conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, under the direction of Rev. G. B. Bowman, and had already been recognized by the Rock River Conference. The little group of preachers, counting \$100 as riches, had little to offer any college except encouragement.

At the meeting on Friday three men — Joshua B. Hardy, John Hayden, and Uriah Ferree — were examined in the presence of the members and received in full connection by the bishop who admonished them not to speak “too long or too loud”. A request of George W. Teas that his church membership and license to preach be restored was rejected. Teas had been angered earlier by the refusal of some of his fellow Methodists to support him in the legislature and had announced his withdrawal from the church by the following rhyme in the *Burlington Gazette*:

Be it known from shore to shore,
That I'm a Methodist no more.

Lest the Methodist authorities appear too hard-hearted, it may be said that two years later Teas was restored to favor and became a successful preacher.

Saturday morning was devoted chiefly to finances. The assets on hand were \$1012, one thousand of which had been turned in by the Western Book Concern. The sum had to be divided into infinitesimal parts — \$8.33 for each of five bishops, including Bishop Morris, and \$9.76 for each of the other two. The remainder was divided among the preachers to supplement unpaid salaries, the allotments varying from \$92.00 paid to Rev. J. L. Kirkpatrick to \$2.56 given to "Widow Roberts".

Membership statistics indicated the growth of Methodist Episcopal Church in Iowa since the first log church was built at Dubuque in 1834. The Dubuque District, including towns as far south as Davenport and Cedar Rapids, reported 1522 white and six colored members. The Burlington District, including Iowa City and towns to the south, reported 2343 white and six colored Methodists, while the Des Moines District with charges from Farmington to Fort Des Moines, added another 1566 persons to the roll, all white. This made a total membership of 5443. In addition there were sixty-one local preachers.

There was no session on the Sabbath. No doubt the members were busy preaching in nearby communities. Monday, however, was a busy as well as a fateful day. Seven men were ordained as deacons and thereby given authority not only to preach but to perform marriage ceremonies, baptize, and assist in the administration of the Lord's Supper. Three were ordained as elders and thus received into the inner circle of the clergy. The stewards reported that they had \$3.31 on hand after paying the allocated sums and the Conference decided to use this money to buy a "book and trunk" for keeping the records. One wonders what happened to this book.

Linking the Iowa Conference to the larger and threatening issues of the time was an amendment, proposed at the General Conference in May, 1844, providing for the division of the capital of the Methodist Episcopal Church, derived largely from the publishing auxiliary, with the newly organized Methodist Episcopal Church South. The Iowa Conference approved the amendment but expressed opposition to the division of the Church.

Resolutions were adopted expressing the thanks of the members of the Conference for the hospitality of the people of Iowa City and the vicinity. Then the bishop rose for the final service, closing the Conference "in the usual way". It is probable

that this included words of admonition and counsel, followed by a prayer. It also included a song and the voices of the frontier preachers were heard in an old hymn written by Charles Wesley.

And let our bodies part,
To different climes repair;
Inseparably join'd in heart,
The friends of Jesus are.

Thus ran the first of the twelve quatrains which may be read in an old hymnal published by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1838, the year the Territory of Iowa was created. There is no music and the twelve stanzas occupy only a page and a half in a book which is three inches tall and about two inches in width. The music, it was explained, could be found in the *Methodist Harmonist*. Both the words and the tune, however, must have been familiar to the older pioneer preachers. They had sung it many times as they parted at the end of conference sessions to move on from one charge to another and from one conference to another.

As the words of the hymn died away, there was an air of expectancy as Bishop Morris rose to read the list of appointments — three presiding elders to have charge of the three districts and thirty-five preachers to shepherd the thirty-two charges. Of these, nine were classed as missions.

Bartholomew Weed was assigned the Burling-

ton District, H. W. Reed the Dubuque District, and Milton Jamison the Des Moines District. The preachers were dispersed far and wide. Calvin E. Farnsworth was assigned to the Turkey River Mission far to the north. Isaac I. Stewart was sent to Fort Madison, and Joshua B. Hardy to Farmington in the Des Moines Valley. On the east, Joseph T. Lewis was to have charge at Davenport, while on the west, Thomas M. Kirkpatrick was assigned the Des Moines Mission (around Ottumwa) and Allen W. Johnson that at Eddyville. Joseph Steinhouser was given charge of the Lead Mines German Mission and George B. Bowman was stationed at Dubuque.

So ran the list as Bishop Morris read on. Some of these charges are not now recorded on a map. One wonders how newly appointed men knew where to go. But pioneer preachers knew the lay of the land. They noted their assignments, said "good-bye" and "God bless you" to their associates, and mounting their horses were soon on their way to their new charges. So the first meeting of the Iowa Conference became history; a new unit of Methodism had begun to function.

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