

Pitching Camp in Iowaland

Along with many other denominations, the Baptists also swarmed into the American West. The first generation of Iowa Baptists came to Iowaland from New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky, while a few entered from the South and from neighboring Missouri.

Marking their way was an ample record of accomplishment — revivals, missionary leaders, camp meetings, and schools. Iowa Baptist growth was characterized by an intense missionary enthusiasm, derived, some historians assert, from their early days of persecution in America. Growth came both through individual pluck and through the grants of missionary agencies.

First and foremost in connection with Baptist organizations stands Rev. John Mason Peck, the founder of Rock Spring Seminary (now Shurtleff College) in Illinois. Peck labored widely in Illinois, Missouri, and territory bordering the Mississippi River for the gathering of the pioneers. It is problematical how many thousands were safely steered to their new homes in the West by following his timely *Emigrants' Guides*. It was through the labors of Peck and others that the American

Baptist Home Mission Society was organized — in 1832. Between 1839 and 1891 this agency invested \$190,560.47 in Iowa to aid struggling Baptist ministers and congregations. Iowa Baptists should cherish the memory of this great soul. As an illustration of their regard for Peck's work, they collected \$45,516.26 for home missions during that same fifty-two year period.

The first Baptist church in Iowaland originated in the vicinity of present-day Burlington, five years before the American Baptist Home Mission Society sent its first worker to Iowa Territory, with the coming of a young couple — William and Hepzibah Manly — from the Brush Creek Baptist church of Green County, Kentucky. Elder John Logan was summoned from Illinois, and on October 19, 1834, he preached to a company of pioneers in the rude hut of Noble Hously. On the day following — October 20th — eleven persons, assisted by Logan, organized the Long Creek Baptist church, the present Baptist church of Danville.

Other churches soon followed: one at Rock Spring, six miles southwest of Burlington, one at Pisgah, 12 miles north of Burlington, and the Union church in Lee County, not far from the Des Moines River. The pioneer Baptist ministers who came to Iowaland before 1840 were Alexander Evans, Hezekiah Johnson, Ezra Fisher, and Calvin Greenleaf. In 1844 Johnson and Fisher left

for the Oregon country where they performed yeoman service. Linfield College stems from their labors.

The year 1839 was a signal year in Iowa Baptist annals. Records show that the first Baptist association was organized on the Saturday before the fourth Sabbath in August, in a grove about fourteen miles west of Burlington. The Rock Spring, Pisgah, and Long Creek churches sent ten delegates. The charm of the scene is suggested by the artist's sketch, showing the Moderator speaking from behind a well-built chair and the nine other Baptist elders seated attentively on a freshly-felled log. Thus began the Iowa Baptist Association, soon to change its name to "Des Moines," with Rev. Jonah Todd as Moderator and Rev. Alexander Evans as Clerk. Rev. Hezekiah Johnson preached the sermon.

By 1840 the Baptist churches at Davenport, Le Claire, Dubuque, and Keosauqua had been organized, and in 1841 Rev. Warren B. Morey, aided by the American Baptist Home Mission Society, began his work in Iowa City. Baptist work was begun the same year in northeastern Iowa at the Winnebago Mission on the Yellow River in Allamakee County. Rev. J. A. Nash commenced his services in central Iowa, with special reference to Fort Des Moines, in 1850, the Des Moines church being organized in 1851.

Among early Iowa Baptist laymen the name of

Deacon Calvin Craven of Washington was well-known and highly respected. Together with his wife and others, Craven organized the Baptist church of Washington on October 2, 1841, scarcely two years after the original settlement of the town. Again Elder Johnson preached the sermon, this time from Daniel 2:44: "In the days of those kings the God of the heavens shall set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed."

From this record of sterling achievement the Iowa Baptists went on to hold a "Convention of brethren, to consider the expediency of forming a Territorial Association for missionary purposes." The following churches were represented at the first meeting of the General Association (State Convention) in Iowa City, June 3-4, 1842:

Bloomington, Muscatine County
 Long Creek, Des Moines County
 Pisgah, Des Moines County
 Iowa City, Johnson County
 Columbus City, Louisa County
 Virginia Grove, Louisa County
 Dubuque, Dubuque County
 Parkhurst, Scott County
 Davenport, Scott County
 Rochester, Van Buren County
 Forks of the Maquoketa, Jackson County
 South Fork of Maquoketa, Jackson County
 Ohio, Marion County (?)

Elder Burton Carpenter of Dubuque was elected Chairman *pro tem*, and Rev. W. B. Morey of

Iowa City, Secretary *pro tem*. The object of the Association was "to promote the preaching of the Gospel, ministerial education and all the general objects of benevolence throughout this Territory." Each church was allotted three delegates, each association five. The new General Association (today's Iowa Baptist Convention) at once became auxiliary to the American Baptist Home Mission Society.

A precious token linking the present with pioneer times serves as a reminder to Iowans today of the part played by the churches in the abolition crusade a century ago. This is the Mars Hill Missionary Baptist Church — Iowa's sole surviving log church building — located in the hills and groves along the Davis and Wapello County line, a few miles southeast of Ottumwa. Built of white oak squared logs, with notched corners and white mortar chinking, and originally having a stone fireplace, the historic church still stands intact after ninety-nine years beside the graveyard where many Civil War heroes share the soil with the first pioneers and their descendants. When fugitive slaves were escaping through Iowa on the Underground Railroad, they found the little church a sanctuary. Both counties have recently completed roads leading directly to Mars Hill Chapel, and one is well repaid for a visit to this Iowa beauty spot.

One particular instance of mercy felt by Iowa

Baptists was that recorded with reference to the Mexican War when, at the Convention of 1846, it was resolved,

That as Christians, Philanthropists, and Americans, we can contemplate our present relations to Mexico, with no other emotions than those of deep and sincere grief;

That it shall be our fervent Prayer to Almighty God, that hostilities may speedily cease, and that deplorable state of affairs be so overruled in his merciful sovereignty, as to facilitate the progress of Evangelical sentiments, throughout that suffering Republic.

The Baptists were likewise shocked by visible tokens of "an alarming and increasing desecration of the holy Sabbath in this State," as the state meeting of 1849 declared. Also worthy of note is the item (for the year 1847), under "Contributions and Collections," of the nobly sentimental side of human experience, the instance being that of "3 little girls and 1 little boy to purchase testaments for heathen children — 50 cents, for the American and Foreign Bible Society." (Baptists then used their own translation of the Bible to emphasize baptism by immersion.)

And what were Iowa Baptists saying about slavery in 1850, the year of the "Compromise?" Assembled in Convention, they declared:

Said system is an infringement of the natural rights of humanity, at war with the progress of civil and religious freedom, and a flagrant violation alike of the spiritual precepts of the Gospel of Christ. Therefore, Resolved, That it is the solemn duty of all Christians to abstain from any

connection with or participation in it, and that we ought earnestly to pray and wisely to labor for its speedy and entire extinction.

With the Civil War on, the Iowa Baptists, meeting at Keokuk in 1861, saw it as

the duty of law-abiding Bible Christians, and especially Baptists, to sustain Constitutional law; and to do their utmost to uphold our Government in this hour of peril, to pray, fight, and work for the country.

The "God-given blessing" of freedom must be preserved and Baptists, accordingly, were enjoined

to pray and hope that the civil war provoked by the seceded States, without any just cause . . . will result in the annihilation of human slavery in our country . . . and we will fully sustain our Government in all the Constitutional measures adopted for its suppression.

Iowa Baptists saw in the War "the chastising hand of God smiting us for our national and individual sins."

The following obituary (here abbreviated) was carried by the *Des Moines Tribune* of June 24, 1915:

"Aunty" Harriet Smith, 81 years old, superintendent and teacher in a Baptist church for fifty years, born in slavery in Virginia, when a small child sold to a man who moved to Mississippi. During the Civil War "Aunty" appealed to the Fourth Iowa Regiment to be brought north. Came to Burlington. The Congregational minister [William Salter] taught her to read and write. She moved to Mount Pleasant and began her church work.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to call-ah me home.

Of such humane stuff have Iowa Baptists ever
been made. May there be no end to their persis-
tent endeavors in behalf of "liberty and justice for
all!"

FREDERICK I. KUHNS