Methodist Church Trials in Illinois

by Robert H. Williams

(A paper read at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Jurisdiction Association of Methodist Historical Societies in 1961, and reprinted here with the permission of the author, a member of the Central Illinois Conference.)

RELIGION AND MORALITY have received a share of the interest in the continuing study of the American frontier. Dr. William Warren Sweet contributed substantially to the materials which have been published, particularly with his collections of source material under the general heading of Religion on the American Frontier. In this series, the volume most related to the present subject is Religion on the American Frontier: Vol. IV: The Methodists, 1783-1840. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946.) Chapter XIII of this book is devoted to "Church Trials Among the Methodists in the Early West." The documents which were used by Dr. Sweet and by his seminar student, Mr. Paul A. Varg, in the preparation of the chapter are a part of the collection of the Illinois Conference Historical Society, located at the Buck Memorial Library, Illinois Wesleyan University, in Bloomington, Illinois. At that time this collection was apparently in a chaotic state. Subsequently an effort was made to introduce order into the collection, but nothing further was done with the documents pertaining to church trials until the author, under the direction of Dr. Richard D. Leonard, of Illinois Wesleyan University, undertook to organize them in the year 1960. Many more documents were located, touching on more than one hundred and fifty trials and investigations conducted during a period of almost one hundred years.

Table One indicates the number of cases which are mentioned in the minutes of the Illinois Annual Conference between 1824 and 1931, by quadrenniums, and the number of these cases which are supported by other materials also in the collection. Discrepancies do not indicate that all these case files are missing, however. In many instances during the early years, a complaint was made during the examination of character at the Conference session and handled satisfactorily there, without further investigation. In later years, many cases are listed simply as "permitted to withdraw" or "permitted to withdraw under complaints," while others are locations of ministers for one reason or another. In these cases the materials are generally lacking from the collection, although some of these files may still be in the custody of other agencies of the Conference. The indicated rise in the number of cases after 1890 is only apparent. The figures are inflated by withdrawals and locations.

In addition to the Illinois Conference materials, the collection con-
tains data from the cases of Central Illinois Conference. No analysis of the Conference Minutes was made for this conference, but Table Two indicates the number of cases for which some other documents are available. The Central Illinois cases roughly parallel those in Illinois. This conference was apparently more troubled by the “holiness” controversy than others. Except for an occasional Central Illinois case selected for illustrative purposes, this paper is based only on the Illinois Conference records. The writer formed an impression that Illinois Conference tended to deal more strictly with its members than Central Illinois Conference, but no attempt is here made to elaborate on this.

Table One

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<th>Quadrennium</th>
<th>Number of Cases Mentioned in Minutes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1928-1931</td>
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Note: Cases were often carried over from one year to the next. They are counted here only in the year of first appearance before the Annual Conference.

Table Two

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Quadrennium</th>
<th>Number of Cases in Which Documents Are Available</th>
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<td>1876-1879</td>
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METHODOIST CHURCH TRIALS IN ILLINOIS, 1824 TO 1960 15
The Methodist Church has always had ready a mechanism for disciplining its ministry and its church members. This began with John Wesley, as the General Rules of the United Societies, which are still preserved in the constitution of the denomination. Each Discipline prints the General Rules, concluding with this statement:

These are the General Rules of our societies: all of which we are taught of God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of our faith and practice. And all these we know his Spirit writes on truly awakened hearts. If there be any among us who observes them not, who habitually breaks any of them, let it be known unto them who watch over that soul as they who must give an account. We will admonish him in the error of his ways. We will bear with him for a season. But, if then he repent not, he hath no more place among us. We have delivered our souls.

Procedures for the trial of ministers and members were established early, and still exist, although they are seldom used today. One of the restrictions on the powers of the General Conference is that it shall not abolish the privileges of ministers and members of proper trial and appeal.

The trials of lay members, unless they exercised some ministerial functions, were normally recorded only in the records of the Quarterly Conference to which they were subject. The Illinois Conference collection includes a few early Quarterly Conference records, but other papers are available on only three such trials. One of the regular questions once asked at quarterly meetings was, “Are there any complaints or appeals?” Dr. Sweet examined the record of the Carrollton Circuit, 1839 to 1850, and has reported the five disciplinary cases which were brought in this one circuit during these eleven years. Trials were common on the Illinois frontier, where morality was hardly of the highest, and Christians were a decided minority, in spite of aggressive evangelistic tactics. John Mason Peck, probably one of the men best informed on the situa-
tion at the time, estimated the total number of persons professing religion at 25,000 in 1834, or about one in eight persons in the state. He reported that the Methodists, with 13,421 members, were preaching in all of the counties of the state. Five years later Peck reported 20,000 Methodists in Illinois, and 40,000 church members. The population had more than doubled, to 420,000, so according to his estimates the ratio of Christians to the total population had dropped to one in ten.

Local preachers, local deacons, and local elders were tried by the Quarterly Conferences, if they had been first adjudged guilty by a committee of investigation composed of their peers. They were to be expelled and deprived of their credentials if the Quarterly Conference found them guilty as charged of acts "sufficient to exclude a person from the kingdom of grace and glory." For lesser offenses, reproof followed the first two offenses, then trial if the error were repeated. The Annual Conference minutes do not record these trials except to note the filing of the credentials of the expelled persons, nor do Conference files preserve the evidence, unless the local preacher filed an appeal to the Annual Conference, which he had the right to do, unlike the local church member.

If traveling preachers were charged with an offense of a serious nature, or crime, they were examined by a committee of their peers and appropriate action was taken at once. The case was then finally adjudicated at the next session of the Annual Conference. As with the local preachers, lesser charges, for "improper tempers, words, or actions," brought only reproof, unless the violations were repeated. Charges might also be brought for disseminating doctrines contrary to the Articles of Religion, or for conducting oneself in a manner which rendered one unacceptable to the people as a traveling preacher. The penalty for the latter was location instead of expulsion. The traveling preachers had the privilege of appealing to the General Conference.

The names of the ministers were called at the Annual Conference sessions during the early years. When each was called, he filed his report for the year. As he did so, any member of the Conference could express objections or complaints, or bring charges against him. The character of the ministers was by no means passed automatically. A little more than a hundred years ago, in a far smaller conference than the Illinois Conference of today, five or more ministers commonly were complained against on the floor of the conference. Relatively minor complaints were discussed and acted upon at once. Otherwise, a committee was created to investigate and report. The committee recommendations were always subject to review by the conference as a whole, and not infrequently they were altered in some particulars, or even reversed. A "Select
Number" was created to deal with serious cases or with cases in which formal charges had been brought.

Gradually the early procedure for examination of character was revised. Conferences stopped meeting with closed doors while the examination of character took place. In 1896, the Committee on Conference Relations was created. By 1909, the character of the ministers was being passed in groups, instead of individually. The 1932 Journal and Yearbook of the Illinois Conference reports that the ministers stood and their characters were passed—a method suggested by the bishop. The 1959 Journal and Yearbook of the conference reports, "No charges against them," in reply to the Disciplinary question, "Are all the ministerial members of the conference blameless in their life and official administration?" Whereas now a minister is assumed to be blameless unless official charges have been brought, once every man was the subject of an annual examination. Even the famous Peter Cartwright was the subject of complaints before the conference in five different years. On one occasion, in 1854, the debate went on for almost three days before the charges were not sustained.

In the presentation which follows, the church trials in the Illinois Annual Conference have been analyzed by the periods in which they occurred. Several tendencies seemed to emerge as these cases were separated and indexed. A change in the nature of the charges brought may be noticed through the years. Also, the verdicts rendered and the penalties have shifted, given equal charges. Connections with other events and movements, inside and outside the church, are also noticeable. For each period, some cases have been selected for particular emphasis, as illustrations or because of their intrinsic interest.

III. Period to 1850

The most frequent charge during the first twenty years of the Illinois Conference was immorality, as far as cases which were actually tried and in which verdicts are available. The emphasis on morality as against doctrine may be seen in the fact that between 1824 and 1843, there were 26 different charges or complaints of immorality, imprudent or unministerial conduct, or unchristian conduct, while a man was charged with "disseminating doctrines which are contrary to our articles of religion" on only three occasions. In these three, the preacher's character was passed after discussion and admonition in two cases, and in the third case the real issue was maladministration. A number of complaints were brought on the conference floor concerning neglect of duty, maladministration, and unacceptability in performing the duties of a preacher, but these were often handled on the spot either by explanation from
the brother in question, or by an immediate discussion by the conference resulting in a decision by that body.

Formal charges do not always reveal the underlying problems, however, as is illustrated by the following Quarterly Conference record as compared with the other known facts:


Q. by P. E. are there any appeals—
An. from a reference to the proceedings of the last qr meeting conference [sic], the case of Reddock Horne who stands suspended as a local Preacher and was continued untill [sic] this meeting was taken up and the charges read by the secretary, the certificates [sic], & testimony in support of the charges, and after a full investigation the qr meeting committee who sit on this case be sustained being of opinion that the said R Horne is guilty as charged in said report—

Q. by P. E. what punishment [sic] will you inflict on said R Horne?
on motion it is discided [sic] unanimously [sic] that said R Horne be expelld [sic] from the Methodist E Church for lying and slander

Peter Cartwright P E.

As a matter of fact, Reddick Horne was one of the founders of the first Methodist Protestant church in Illinois, organized in Morgan County on February 13, 1829. James Leaton records that he "had been twice suspended for his views on church polity," and "after his trial and deposition," the new church was formed. The Quarterly Conference action quoted does not reveal the dispute over church polity in its charges of "lying and slander," but the relationship is certainly more than coincidental.

The charges of immorality are quite interesting. They reflect the general society as well as the church's standards on the frontier. "Immorality" was the general classification not only for sexual offenses, to which it later came to be progressively restricted, but for falsehood or lying, slander, taking bribes, drinking, fighting on the Sabbath, violation of contracts, and non-payment of debt. The same charge might include specifications embracing several of these. For example, in the cases of S. F. Whitney and W. B. Mack in 1836, the facts appear to be as follows:

W. B. Mack and Mrs. Whitney had advanced beyond friendship to adultery. Mr. Mack confessed his guilt in a letter to the Conference of 1836. "A unanimous vote (the members of the conference
rising to their feet) was given to expel the said Wilder B. Mack from the roll of the conference and from the Methodist Episcopal Church." It was resolved that the particulars of the case, with the conference action, should be prepared for publication by a committee of Peter Cartwright, John Clark, and J. T. Mitchell. The report of the committee was returned as a "notice" for publication and adopted. A certified copy was furnished to the editor of the Rushville Journal (Rushville was the seat of the 1836 conference) for publication, "with a request that it be published in the papers throughout the country generally. It is apparent that not only was the behavior of Mr. Mack disapproved, but that the conference wished the entire state to know what had been done. Evidently they were more concerned with being known as a body that dealt forthrightly with the sin in its ranks than with concealing their sins. The contrast with later practice will be apparent.

Mack mentioned in his letter to the conference that he had given Mr. Whitney a thousand dollars, all he had, to keep the matter secret, but that the pledge had been violated. Whitney, also a member of the conference, evidently took Mack's bribe, which was in land, intending to convey it to his wife, then leave her. He remained undecided for several weeks about the separation after receiving the land, however, with the result that the community suspected his motives. Moreover, he sought to prevent the civil prosecution of Mack. And finally, when he did decide to leave his wife, he still hesitated, instead of doing so at once, filing for divorce and transferring the property to her, which would have clarified his intentions. The conference committee judged him to be "innocent of any criminal or sinful intention," but imprudent, and recommended "as Br. Whitney designed to obtain a bill of divorce from his wife, that in their opinion it would be better, both for Br. Whitney and the church that he be not appointed to a circuit in this conference the ensuing year." Thereupon, "in view of all the circumstances in his case, the Superintendent was requested to transfer him to the Erie Conference."

The conference was always quick to act in cases of immorality during the early years, but it rarely succeeded in being as efficient as in the case of Simon Peter (his real name) in 1837. The preachers stayed in the homes of the local church members during the time the conference was in session. Mr. Peter had been invited to the home of a Mrs. Forsythe for the night after the evening services at the conference session on September 28, 1837. When shown to his room, he embraced and kissed her, drawing her toward its door, after asking questions to ascertain the safety of the situation. Mrs. Forsythe ran to a neighbor for help. Apparently Mr. Peter was still allowed to spend the night there, after explanations, but charges of "Immoral Conduct" were brought before the conference on Sep-
tember 30. Mr. Peter pleaded guilty and was expelled from the church by a unanimous standing vote. In 1839, his neighbors, members of the church, of the Grafton Circuit Quarterly Conference, presented a petition for his restoration on grounds of repentance and subsequent Christian deportment. The recommendation for restoration of credentials lost, by a vote of 34 in favor and 46 opposed. Perhaps the results might have been different if the conference had not been placed in such an embarrassing position. As it was, Mr. Peter was expelled from the ministry and membership of the church within forty-eight hours of his offense.

Similar offenses brought equally severe penalties to other men during these years, although hardly as quickly. In 1841, Reuben Plummer was expelled from the church for immoral conduct, under three specifications, putting “his hand on Miss Ogden in a very indecent manner—having it between her legs,” stepping on a woman’s foot “to show a Christian affection,” and going “twice in the same night” to the bedside of a Mrs. Kizard.

Furney Stanley, a local preacher, was charged with immorality in 1844 for “puting [sic] a lot of worthless shingles on Mr. Preston Funkhouser for good ones and thereby violating a plain contract made by yourself and him” and for falsehood in connection with this action. Stanley was found guilty and expelled from the church by the Fairfield Quarterly Meeting in 1845. He exercised his right of appeal to the Annual Conference, and the decision of the Quarterly Conference was reversed, but the charge does indicate that a Christian was expected to be honest in business.

Another interesting trial took place in 1848, when a local deacon, Elijah Knox, was charged as follows:

Charge Immoralities preferred by Abel H. Scott
Specification 1st. For selling pork that was disordered.
Specification 2nd. For proposing to hire me (Scott) to shoot the Widow Young’s horse beast.
Specification 3rd. For falsehood by saying his horse had killed one of the Widow Young’s sheep when he had not.

The first specification was sustained. Dogs belonging to Knox had hurt a hog belonging to a Mr. Pratt, and Knox killed the hog, agreeing to pay Pratt for it. Scott, a neighbor, testified that when killed “it had piggs [sic] in it, which from appearance had been dead in the hog until they were partially decayed, being in a manner rotten.” Scott and Knox allegedly agreed that the hog was not fit to eat, but Knox then sold it for good meat, although he made no attempt to conceal the fact that it had been killed because of the injury done to it by the dogs. The purchaser’s wife testified that “there was nothing the matter with the hog as she knew of,” and
that "it eat very well." The Knox family testified that they also had eaten some of the meat. Elijah Knox was expelled from the church by the Quarterly Conference, but he appealed to the Annual Conference. There the decision was reversed, after the minutes of the Quarterly Conference trial had been read and he made a statement in his own behalf.

Peter Cartwright brought charges against James Hitchcock in 1840 for unacceptability, in a case which may illustrate the nature of such a charge. There were two specifications:

When he travelled in the regular work he so conducted himself in reference to his support and in speaking of his own talents as a Preacher so as to hurt the feelings of the Brethren.

He has physical ability and health sufficient to travel and preach long and loud and yet refuses to do so.

The entire testimony is found in the conference minutes. The first specification was sustained, and Hitchcock was located.

There is no clear indication that the trials reflect the division of the church between North and South in 1844, but that abolition was an issue in the church, as in the state, is shown by the case of P. W. Nichols, in 1838. A Dr. Worrell, who was not even a church member, brought a lengthy bill of charges which evidently rooted in the fact that Nichols had abolitionist leanings. The Presiding Elder replied that the plaintiff was not eligible to bring charges, and that in any case his charges were not serious enough to involve more than reproof. He concluded his letter:

With all sympathy for your feelings, therefore, and desire for the best interests of the church I judge that investigation on these charges is uncalled for—and sincerely hope you will dismiss the entire subject from your mind. "Study to be quiet." "Follow peace with all men" and holiness—And may he whose right it is to reign in your heart direct your steps.

Nevertheless, Dr. Worrell pressed the case, writing to Bishop Andrew. An investigation did follow at the 1838 Conference, and Nichols was located, after considerable debate.

Conference members on various occasions made use of their privilege of an appeal to the General Conference, among them Charles Atkinson, who was located in his absence in 1844. In 1845 he appealed the action of the 1844 Conference. The 1845 Conference reconsidered the case, but ended by reaffirming the location, whereupon he gave notice of his intention of appealing to the General Conference of 1848. He was charged with unacceptability. Apparently his Presiding Elder was prosecuting because Atkinson had
failed to meet an appointment, although the evidence, including medical certificates that a throat infection had been at least part of the trouble, indicates there were extenuating circumstances. Atkinson’s appeal was presented at the General Conference of 1848 by Peter Cartwright, and the decision of the Annual Conference was reversed.

During the early years the examination of character was evidently taken very seriously. Frivolous or malicious charges seem to be rare, although they increased after 1850. The 1847 Annual Conference is the exception to this generalization:

John P. Richmond was complained against by W. S. McMurray, but passed after a request to withdraw to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (subsequently reconsidered).

Richmond then complained that “Bro. McMurray had made the pulpit a vehicle to prosecute a tirade against Masonry.” A Brother Barrett added that McMurray had said “that he could go against Mexico and fight with the soldiers all the week and preach to them on the Sabbath.” McMurray was passed after explanation.

Later in the day, Bro. George W. Robbins was called, and objections were filed against him for maladministration by E. G. Falconer. Robbins was passed. Falconer was then called, and Robbins complained against him, presenting charges which were referred to a committee.

According to the conference minutes, ten preachers were challenged in 1847, making it one of the busiest years in the history of the conference in this respect.

IV. 1850-1859

The number of complaints per year dropped from the high level in the last years of the 1840s to lower in 1854 and 1855, then rose again, but not as high as before. Before the Civil War there was a clear tendency toward fewer charges being brought, while the size of the conference was increasing. Immorality still formed the major cause for complaints between 1844 and 1860 (28 cases), but there were also charges of maladministration (10), leaving the work without permission (4), unacceptability (4), improper conduct (5) and faulty doctrine (3). It is conspicuous that the minutes do not give the charges in many cases mentioned, reflecting a trend away from detailing such matters in the record. The charges can be derived from other sources in some cases. The listing here is by the most serious charge; often several charges were made in a single case.

Most of the examples to be presented involved immorality. It may be mentioned in passing that several cases reflect the frontier controversies over land claims, although no example is here presented.
The observance of the Sabbath apparently received special emphasis about 1850. In 1849, a complaint was made against Benjamin Newman that he had traveled on the Sabbath. His offense seems to have been that he either went to the post office or sent someone for his mail on a Sunday. His character passed after discussion, but the conference requested the Committee on the Sabbath to prepare a general resolution on the subject of receiving letters from the post office on the Sabbath. In 1852, Newman himself complained that F. Magee had "left Chicago and traveled on a canal boat on the Sabbath day," moving that he be charged with high impropriety for his action, but the conference rejected the motion.

In 1852, William Ellers was charged with using intoxicating beverages. He was suspended until the next session of the annual conference. He wrote a letter of confession to the conference, offering to locate and pledge himself to abstinence if the conference would lift his suspension and restore his parchments, but the brethren were not inclined to be so lenient. Peter Cartwright moved his expulsion, but a substitute by W. D. R. Trotter that Ellers be expelled from the ministry but not from the membership of the church prevailed.

Thomas W. Jones was brought to trial in 1850 and again in 1851 on marital charges. Dr. Sweet has printed part of the 1850 case, for breach of marriage contract. It ended in Jones's suspension till the next session of the conference. The minutes of the 1851 trial reflect debate over increased "table expenses" resulting from his marriage. Once again the charge was sustained and a one-year suspension voted (less than had been demanded on the conference floor).

One of the most bizarre cases in the history of the conference was tried in 1857, when James Knapp was charged with drinking, with "dishonesty," which included the theft of a body, with lying, and with perjury. Knapp and another man disinterred the body to get the skeleton. A drugstore employee came to work one morning and found the skeleton back of the counter and the flesh and viscera in a pan in another room. He testified that he had previously heard the defendant planning the action. The father of the deceased learned of the exhumation and was instrumental in bringing the charges. Knapp, a superannuated preacher, was a member of the Southern Illinois Conference, but lived within the bounds of the Illinois Conference, and was apparently expelled from the church by its action.

Two cases during the decade particularly reflect on Peter Cartwright. The first, a prolonged case against Cartwright in 1854, with a concomitant charge against I. C. Kimber, grew out of a dispute over the sale of mission property in Springfield. This case is marked by an exceptional number of objections, appeals to the
bishop for rulings, and similar technicalities. This behavior was relatively rare during the early period, although later it became almost a standard pattern. Both Cartwright and Kimber were passed, but it is apparent that a substantial minority did feel Cartwright had overstepped his authority, since the vote for sustaining the first general charge was 19 for to 36 against.

It would be interesting to know more about the disagreements between Cartwright and Daniel J. Snow. Snow was admitted on trial in 1843. He left his appointment in 1847 to accept work for one year with the Illinois State Colonization Society. According to James Leaton he was reproved by the conference for his action, but actually the reproof was initially voted, then stricken from the record. There is no indication that Cartwright took part in the 1847 action. In 1848, Snow wrote the conference a letter which was regarded as "disrespectful and unbecoming." It was resolved "that the reproaches against certain members of the conference named therein, are highly imprudent, and that Brother Snow deserves the censure of this conference." Snow was censured and located, in his absence and without his consent. He was present in 1849 and requested permission to address the conference in connection with the 1848 location. When this was granted, he gave an explanation of his actions and expressed his intention of appealing to the General Conference. Peter Cartwright disavowed any personal unfriendliness toward Snow, but stated "he had been and still was aggrieved at Bro. Snow's course and letters." Mr. Snow brought charges against Cartwright in 1851, but withdrew them before a decision was reached in the case.

The Illinois Conference action was reversed and Snow was reinstated by the General Conference of 1852. Cartwright then brought charges against him of immorality, falsehood, slander, and fraud. The charges were partially sustained, and Snow was expelled by the 1853 conference after a vigorous prosecution by Cartwright. The following substitute motion was offered but lost:

Although Rev. D. J. Snow has been by our Conference voted guilty of Falsehood and Slander, yet in view of the fact that a palliation is found in misunderstandings that may have existed between him & Dr. Cartwright therefore we decide that he should be deprived of all ministerial functions and that he be required to render up his parchments—

Mr. Snow again indicated his intention of appealing the decision. Although other more serious items are also mentioned, it is interesting to note that Dr. Cartwright’s charges of slander were based partly on a statement in print by Snow that "Dr. C. was rapidly losing the great influence he formerly exerted over the conference."
As a result of Snow's appeal to the 1856 General Conference, his case was remanded for a new trial because of irregularities. Peter Cartwright again brought charges, this time on grounds of immorality, contumacy, and unministerial and unchristian conduct, and Snow was suspended for one year by the 1857 conference. In 1858 Snow was charged with falsehood (not by Cartwright this time), and on the word of a Brother Hecox that he had expressed his desire to withdraw from the conference and the church, Snow was recorded in his absence as withdrawn under charges of immorality. He was present at the 1859 conference, and evidently had not been notified of the action taken in 1858. On hearing of it he first gave notice of appeal, then placed a memorial before the conference requesting an investigation, on grounds that the allegations made in 1858 were not only false, but that the man who had brought the 1858 charge admitted that he did not know the truth of his allegation. Nevertheless, affidavits were taken that the conference action in locating him was based on his own statements. Apparently the previous action was affirmed, although the validity of the 1858 charge was not directly considered, which seems to be a rather conspicuous silence. James Leaton says that Snow went to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South; he is not mentioned further in the Illinois Conference records.

A more thorough investigation would be necessary to determine all the facts of this case, but Snow evidently opposed Cartwright vigorously, at least after 1848, and Cartwright reciprocated by prosecuting Snow with at least equal vigor. These years around the mid-century are the ones in which Peter Cartwright seems to have been most vocal as the upholder of faith and morality, at least among the preachers of the Illinois Conference. One might suggest that they were also the years in which he was most stoutly opposed. Later, he came to be regarded as the symbol and father of Illinois Methodism.

V. 1860-1869

During the decade of the 1860s several trends are noticeable. Except in 1868, when eight cases were brought, fewer cases per year came before the conference. The years 1863, 1864, and 1866 were somewhat above average for the decade. The nature of the charges also altered noticeably. Of thirty-two new cases, only seven were for immorality. Eleven were for improper conduct, four for unacceptability, two for maladministration, and two were doctrinal. The conference repeatedly reduced charges of immorality to imprudence, which naturally involved lighter penalties.

These new cases of "imprudent" conduct actually sometimes involved more serious misdemeanors than those which a few years earlier brought prompt expulsion from the church as "immorality."
In 1852, William Ellers had been expelled for drinking, despite his offer to locate. In the 1860s, apparently neither drinking nor selling intoxicants was sufficient grounds for expulsion. W. C. Lacey was complained against in 1868 for drinking wine, and doing so publicly. His explanation sufficed, however, and his character was passed, although his act was condemned. A. F. Rogers was repeatedly brought to trial—in 1864 for theft and selling tobacco on Sunday, in 1866 for selling spirituous liquors and for falsehood, in 1869 for selling spirituous liquors and for having a wicked and malicious spirit. Yet the penalty in 1864 was only admonition, and in 1866 and 1869 one-year suspensions.

Immorality in sexual offenses was being similarly redefined. The most striking example comes from the Central Illinois Conference files, so the parallel must be interpreted with some caution. G. W. Gray was brought to trial in 1865 on a charge of “unchristian conduct” for making advances toward young ladies attending Grand Prairie Seminary. The charge had eight specifications, extending over several years. Five of the eight, and the charge as a whole, were sustained.

The great crime of the war years was disloyalty, as the Methodist Episcopal Church identified itself closely with the Union cause. Mere rumors of disloyalty brought challenges on the conference floor for W. P. Paxson and W. R. Howard in 1863, although both were passed after explanations. Howard was reprimanded by the chair. Suspicions of W. C. Blundell voiced the same year were referred to his Presiding Elder for investigation. Mr. Blundell was brought to trial at Marshall, Illinois, on July 26, 1864. The charges were:

I Charge—Disloyalty to the government of the United States.
1st Specification—In a failure to identify himself with any of the movements looking to a support of the Government.
2nd Specification—In selecting as his daily associates those known to be in sympathy with the Rebellion.
3rd Specification—In speaking disrespectfully of a Union Prayer Meeting held in Marshall for the avowed purpose of praying for the Union Soldiers.
4th Specification—In failing to pray in public for the President or Armies of the United States.

II Charge—Immorality.
1st Specification—In visiting groceries or Liquor Shops, and in associating with such persons as are usually found in such places.
2nd Specification—In a failure to recognize the obligation of the Nation to observe a day of National Thanksgiving when so ordered by the Chief Magistrate.
The committee found Blundell guilty of disloyalty, but not of immorality, although they judged him imprudent. He was suspended until the ensuing Annual Conference. The evidence offered is almost entirely of a negative nature. It seems to indicate that Blundell did not take a strong stand either for or against the government. Some of the testimony indicated that his ministry had been marked for years by staying out of political questions, but neutrality was apparently not enough in the heat of the Civil War. Having been suspended, Blundell withdrew from the ministry and membership of the church by a letter dated July 28, 1864.

The trial of John Nottingham in 1866 for inefficiency (unacceptability as a minister) shows what was expected in those days. Nottingham was located "at his own request" after the charge had been sustained. Peter Cartwright chaired the committee of investigation. The following excerpt from the minutes of the trial is instructive:

Bro. J. H. Moore, P. E. of Bro. Nottingham stated that such were the peculiarities of Bro. Nottingham that he could not be useful as a travelling preacher—that the difficulty was constitutional with Bro. N.—that he had no power to impress others—that he could not sing. His moral character was unimpeachable—and he has been prudent in his deportment—but has no power to control others. ... Bro. N. seems to be more inefficient than he would otherwise be, on account of his feeble health—Bro. N. seems to have some ability to instruct persons in private, but not in public with power so as to affect men’s minds.

Nottingham was diligent in his pastoral work and in Sunday school matters also, but his inability to sing and to speak with such force as to “control others,” with his health, was regarded as grounds for location.

A charge was brought against W. B. M. Colt the same year for his "great indiscretion in the use of language touching theological institutes, as well as in speaking of the condition of justified persons in contrast with the ungodly." He was passed after admonition. In 1868 Colt, W. H. Rayburn, and A. C. Armentrout were all charged with teachings productive of insubordination. Armentrout and Colt were passed and located “at their own request,” while Rayburn, against whom more serious charges were pending, was the subject of an investigation by the Presiding Elder between the Conference sessions and was deposed from the ministry in 1869.

VI. After 1870

By 1870 the great era of church trials had ended. To be sure, a few cases continued—15 complaints in the 1870s, 13 during the 1880s, 23 during the 1890s, over 40 between 1900 and 1930, but the
actual trials were few. The church discovered the device of permitting withdrawals under charges, and withdrawals increased, being used in 1877, 1879, and steadily thereafter, almost entirely replacing the practice of expulsion.

Since 1870, only seven persons have been recorded as expelled from the ministry and membership of the church—H. O. Hoffman in 1882, for bastardy, fornication and falsehood; S. K. Coats in 1888 for immorality (taking “indecent liberties”) (This expulsion was reversed by a Judicial Conference); J. H. Williams, a local preacher, in 1891, for falsehood and dishonesty, upheld on appeal to the Annual Conference; W. F. Wright, in 1894 and 1895, for forcing a separation with his wife, falsehood, slander, profanity, encouraging gambling, and insubordination; John B. Wolfe in 1902, for fornication and adultery, lying and falsifying, high imprudence and unministerial conduct; F. H. Lathrop in 1921, for obtaining money by misrepresentation and false statements; and S. T. Weaver in 1925, for fraudulent dealings.

During the same period, nineteen persons were permitted to withdraw under charges or complaints. The most prevalent public activity of the Committee of Conference Relations after 1904 seems to have been in connection with locations, voluntary or involuntary, of ministers in supernumerary status. The trend toward condoning the behavior of the person begun earlier continued, so that increasingly the conference held that there was no ground for action in the complaints brought before it, especially if those complaints were concerned with leaving the work. There were two investigations during the early 1880s for alleged doctrinal deviations. For the rest, leaving the work, which rarely brought severe penalties, and immorality, more commonly defined during these years as “imprudent and unministerial conduct,” accounted for the few cases. It has now been more than fifty years since a full trial was conducted in the Illinois Conference for any cause other than mismanagement of financial affairs.

Two cases during the 1890s will be summarized because of their similarity to earlier cases. The 1892 case of Hardin W. Davis is interesting in that the charge was immorality, specifically being intoxicated. Mr. Davis pleaded guilty, with extenuating circumstances. He wrote that he had begun to drink as a boy, before entering the ministry, thinking that it was only a habit that he could break. After his conversion and entry into the ministry, he fought his desire for alcoholic beverages successfully, until his “physician prescribed gin for kidney trouble.” He then began drinking again, but friends guided him to the Keeley Institute. He affirmed, “I went to Dwight, was treated, and cured. . . .” He made an eloquent plea for forgiveness and another chance in the church. Medical testimony, including that of the head of the Institute, and the testimony
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of alcoholics who had taken the Keeley treatment, was presented in support of the belief that alcoholism is, at least in some cases, a disease, and of the efficacy of the Keeley cure. Nevertheless, the charges were unanimously sustained, and Davis was suspended locally. He was permitted to withdraw under charges at the Annual Conference. Thus a cycle was completed, from the expulsion of William Ellers for the use of intoxicants in 1852 through the milder treatment of A. F. Rogers and W. C. Lacey in the 1860s to the permission to withdraw under charges granted Hardin W. Davis. The church was again viewing drinking with increased disapproval. The Ellers and Davis cases are strikingly parallel; the difference in outcome reflects the changing views within the conference.

The file in the 1894 case of Vincent Aten, a member of the Central Illinois Conference, contains an illuminating letter written to Aten by his Presiding Elder, J. S. Cumming, dated April 14, 1891:

Last evening I received a bill of charges by Mail from Bro. Lessig against you. They are not in proper form, or I would send you a copy. As soon as he corrects them I will send them.

I have tried to keep him from preferring charges, but it seems that he is determined. I have hitherto [sic] advised you and others not to prosecute him, but I can do so no longer. I suppose there must be a trial.

I write to you confidentially. I have consulted good men. They and I think that, in view of all the facts in the case, the charges that have been withheld so long should be preferred immediately. I recommend these things:

1. That you consult Bro's. Sheeley and Woodmanser.

2. Prepare charges, simple and direct, and few. I suggest (1.) Violation of the Rule of Discipline which forbids "speaking evil of magistrates [sic] or ministers,—Evil speaking. (2.) Swearing— (3.) Refusing to attend the means of grace—(He has been labored with.)—Under each charge briefly state one or more—(not too many) specifications, which you can prove by two or more witnesses.

I visited Bro. Suckey today and engaged him to take care of the trial. I will give him an appointment in writing as soon as you let me know who signs the charges. Consult him in everything.

3. Write me as soon as this is arranged, giving me a copy of the charges, and any other information you think I ought to have.

4. Let all be done within a day or two at the farthest so that the trial may take place next week, if possible. If later it will interfere with Dist. Conf.—
5. *Keep quiet*. Say nothing to any body, except the brethren you consult with, and enjoin secrecy. . . .

This letter probably indicates the attitude toward trials which prevailed during the 1890s, both in what is said and in its implications. In connection with the second recommendation, a rule of thumb during these years is that the number of charges and specifications bears an inverse ratio to their actual significance and validity. A strong case did not require many specifications.

VII

Times have changed. Society has changed, and so has the church. The decreasing number of trials in recent years may reflect more concern on the part of the conference about the quality of the men who are admitted into it. But it seems more likely that there are fewer trials because of a slackening of church standards in relation to the general culture and/or because of changes in the way misdemeanors are handled. The changing nature of the charges and of the penalties has been indicated.

The most heinous offense in the frontier church was immorality, broadly defined. The church in those years was consciously, vigorously, and conscientiously engaged in self-examination. It demanded of ministers and members alike a standard of personal morality well above that prevailing on the frontier, and brought action swiftly against violators. This moral impact should not be forgotten. It was as much a part of the frontier church, at least among Methodists in Illinois, as the camp meeting. With the passing years, the gap between the church and its environment has narrowed. The general culture is more moral—or at least it is less blatant in its immorality, and the church itself has become more tolerant. On the frontier, morality was portrayed in black and white. If a charge was at all serious, not much consideration was given the defendant’s motives, his apologies, or his pleas of extenuating circumstances. The verdict was “guilty” or “not guilty.” Today we see our actions in shadings of gray. Perhaps this is better. But the old system worked in its day, facing a less complex culture, and one should not be too hasty to discredit it or to say there were many trials because the preachers were poorly trained and often spiteful. It has been suggested that the early examination of character was regarded solemnly by the participants.

The morality for which the church stood was individual rather than social, however. It is always impossible for the church to isolate itself from the impact of the culture, but from the present perspective, the desirability of some of its involvement might be questioned.

An effort has been made to show the nature of the charges brought
during various periods in the history of the Illinois Conference, and how both the charges and the methods of dealing with them have changed. Immorality, in the sense in which the frontier church used the term, has always been the major basis of charges, although later generations preferred to term the same behavior "imprudent and unministerial conduct."

Where once conference members were examined, tried on properly presented charges, admonished, or even summarily expelled for their sins, they now appear in private before a committee in case of "indiscretions." Behavior which once led to expulsion is more often handled today by moving the individual to a church in some remote part of the conference, or by allowing him to withdraw, or by transferring him to another conference. Is this better? The writer has his doubts. As Dr. Nolan B. Harmon (now Bishop) suggests, "discipline must be had and by so much as a wrongdoer is allowed to continue wrongdoing in the church of God, by that much is the entire church hurt and weakened, and the way made easier for others to do evil also."

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