



DISCOVERY

edited by
Kenneth E. Rowe

Joseph Dixon, One of the Best Circuit Stewards
Peter Cartwright Ever Saw, and the
Lewis and Clark Expedition

by Tony Stoneburner

Writing history is a matter of establishing facts (or speculating about likelihoods) and making connections. Usually the linking of the individual facts is to larger and larger contexts, concentric or overlapping: we place the circuit-steward within the context of the annual conference, and the annual conference within the context of the denomination and/or the region, and those within the context of Protestantism, or Christianity, or religion, or of the nation or western civilization. The result is a generalization, perhaps valid, often mild, sometimes banal. The mystery of the particularity of personhood, the uniqueness of selves (a basic Christian doctrine) dissolves in the generalization.

Therefore I sometimes prefer to make a different kind of connection, to link fact with fact rather than fact with context. A good example might be the tracing of all the relationships between Peter Cartwright and Abraham Lincoln, but I have a simpler example in mind in the present instance.

Whatever literary judgment we make of Peter Cartwright as the author of a book (mine is that he cannot find a strong enough structure for his autobiography to sustain his cornucopious anecdotage and to prevent its becoming one blessed thing after another, an atomistic linearity almost as monotonous as one damned thing after another), we have to acknowledge that he is master of the anecdote and of the narration of the single episode. A favorite such narration of mine is the one about Joseph Dixon, on Horse Creek, a class leader and a steward

of the Sangamon circuit in Illinois. Cartwright immediately praises him as steward: "I think he was one of the best stewards I ever saw."¹ And eventually he indicates why: "The round before each quarterly meeting, brother Dixon, the steward, would take his horse and accompany the preacher, and after preaching, and the class had met, he would rise and call on the Church for their aid in supporting the Gospel. He invariably made it a rule to see that every member of his own class paid something every quarter to support the Gospel, and if there were any too poor to pay, he would pay for them."² Last of all, saving best till last, Cartwright recounts the conversion of Dixon, a conversion without the usual ecclesiastical-institutional means of grace and therefore with unusual elements, marvelous, yet, nevertheless, with a rather stereotypical psychic pattern. (See Cartwright's *Autobiography*, Centennial Edition, pages 171-173.)

What hath God wrought? By itself and in isolation, the story of Joseph Dixon is wonderful. But it grows even more so if we recognize its link to another story, the story which is almost the archetypal American story, the Lewis and Clark expedition. As the company returned from the winter on the Pacific, its two leaders had separated temporarily, Lewis to explore the Marias and Clark the Yellowstone. On Tuesday 12 August 1806, Lewis, seeing that his men and he are not far behind Clark and his, and eager for the reunion of the total party, is making all speed downstream on the Missouri, in North Dakota, when he encounters two hunters from Illinois, Joseph Dickson and Forest Han(d)cock.³ It is my guess that "Joseph Dickson" of *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* and "Joseph Dixon" of the

¹Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography*. Centennial edition. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956, p. 171. "In 1819 Joseph Dixon, who had settled at Shiloh in St. Clair County as early as 1806, moved to Sangamon County, and settled on Horse Creek." James Leaton, *Methodism in Illinois*. Cincinnati: Walden & Stowe, 1883, p. 168.

²Cartwright, *Autobiography*, p. 171.

³Meriwether Lewis, *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, edited by Bernard DeVoto. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, c1953. "Hancock" p. 447; "Handcock" p. 458.

Autobiography of Peter Cartwright are one and the same person.⁴ Orthography was still creative, phonetic, and unconventional at the beginning of the nineteenth century in America, among government officials and religious leaders, on the frontier and elsewhere.

Bernard DeVoto in his edition of *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* annotates at this point the character and importance of the presence of the hunters from Illinois: "Thesewo trappers are not only the first white men whom the expedition has seen since leaving the Mandan villages in April 1805 — they are also the first to follow the trail which the expedition had blazed."⁵

Their primacy in fur-seeking follow-up on the expedition does not exhaust the importance of the encounter. The hunters from Illinois, by offering him equipment and shares in their take of peltry, recruited a member of the expedition, John Colter, to join them. Lewis and Clark, making clear to the others that they are making an exception, granted Colter permission to do so: "We agreed to allow him the privilage provided no one of the party would ask or expect a similar permission to which they all agreed that they wished Colter every suckcess and that as we did not wish any of them to Separate untill we Should arrive at St. Louis they would not apply or expect it &c."⁶ One reason that Colter gave for his going with Dickson and Han(d)cock, rather than with the expedition, has long seemed to me to be an essential

⁴I have been unable to establish that "Joseph Dickson" and "Joseph Dixon" are identical. So far I have found only one other reference to Joseph Dixon. The centennial history of Sangamon County includes this brief notice: "Dixon, Joseph, was among the earliest settlers on Horse Creek. He was the principal mover in establishing Zion Chapel in Cotton Hill township, to which he afterwards deeded five acres of land for church and cemetery purposes. His family are buried there, but he died in 1844 at the house of a daughter, near Franklin, Morgan County, Ill., and was buried there." John Carroll Power, *History of the Early Settlers of Sangamon County Illinois*. Springfield, Ill.: E. A. Wilson & Co., 1876, p. 253. A small piece by Thomas Banks Thorpe, "The Trapper's Christmas Carol," published six years later (1870) indicates (as I have to admit, "by furnishing a context"!) how reliable in secondary details is the second-hand Cartwright story of Joseph Dixon. Thorpe was the son of a Methodist circuit-rider, attended Wesleyan University in Connecticut, and wrote a masterpiece of so-called Southwestern humor, *The Big Bear of Arkansas*. "The daring enterprise exhibited by the professional hunter in pursuit of fur-bearing animals," he wrote in *Appleton's Journal* for January of 1870, "is but little known.... Selecting a place favorable for their business, they make their lodge under some shelving rock, or build a burrow in the open ground, sufficiently large to accommodate themselves, and store the peltries they gather up through the hunting-season. For long months they have no excitement but danger; the constant glare of the snow produces semi-blindness; the sameness and coarseness of their food bring on scurvy; and often they find themselves buried beneath a mountain snow-drift, their efforts to escape from which frequently ending in death." Thomas Banks Thorpe, "The Trappers's Christmas Carol," *Appleton's Journal*, vol. 2 (January 1870), p. 15.

⁵Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 447.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 456. "Suckcess" is a powerful Swiftian and Joycean pun!

articulation of wilderness men: he felt that he "would be lonely in St. Louis."⁷ The three partners and the expedition separated on Saturday, 17 August 1806, five days after the initial encounter.⁸

The Cartwright account, published half a century later, ascribes to Dixon two partners as though from the beginning of the project. The eye-witness Lewis and Clark account states that the original two, Dickson and Han(d)cock, became three far up the Missouri. The next spring, Colter, having separated from his partners (according to O'Hagan), descended the Missouri until he met Manuel Lisa of the Missouri Fur-Trading Company at the mouth of the Platte. Lisa hired Colter, and they built a fort at the mouth of the Bighorn. Late that fall, Colter, laden with thirty-pound pack and rifle, made a successful (suckcessfull!) 500-mile overland journey on snowshoes to negotiate a trade agreement with the Crows; he returned during spring 1808.⁹

Late that summer, with John Potts, also a veteran of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Colter made a long water journey to negotiate with the Blackfoot. That trip was, to say the least, unsuccessful: the Indians whom they were seeking killed Potts outright and, taking Colter captive, stripped him completely, gave him a headstart, in a pursue-to-the-death race to entertain the restless young braves of the tribe. Colter, running for his life, greatly outdistanced all but one of them, killed (with a fallen-short spear cast at him) the one closest to him, reached the Jefferson Fork of the Missouri six miles from his starting point, entered its water and hid under a logjam of driftwood, and then, when night fell, started on a trek: in eight days, barefoot and naked, nourished only by roots, he travelled cross-country two hundred miles through October cool mountains to the fort of Lisa at the mouth of the Bighorn, and entered legend (*Astoria* by Washington Irving, pp. 209-214; "The Man Who Walked Naked Across Montana," *Wilderness Men* by Howard O'Hagan, pp. 103-119).

And that is my simple point. Joseph Dixon was a heroic figure among heroic figures; his story braids with two other great stories, the historic expedition of Lewis and Clark and the historical-legendary footrace of Colter across Montana, and his story is worthy of theirs.

⁷Howard O'Hagan, *Wilderness Men*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958, p. 105.

⁸Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

⁹The earliest account of the Colter feat of courage, endurance, and resourcefulness I have discovered is in *Bradbury's Travels in the Interior of America: 1809-1811*, reprinted in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels: 1748-1846*. Cleveland: A. H. Clark Co., 1904, Vol. V, footnotes 17 and 18, pp. 44-47.