ALFRED BRUNSON AND THE
WISCONSIN MISSIONARY FRONTIER

by Steven C. Schulte

One of the most important yet neglected aspects of the American Westward movement is the missionary frontier. Far too often scholars overlook missionary work while concentrating on the more glamorous features of the frontier experience: the Indian wars, the mining frontier, and the cattlemen. Of the many denominations active in missionary work, none was more effective or productive than the Methodists.

In the Old Northwest the Methodists labored tediously to carry the Lord's message to both Native American and white pioneers. One of the most interesting yet neglected pioneer Methodist missionaries is the Rev. Alfred Brunson. Brunson lived to be ninety years old; remembered every president of the United States from Washington to Hayes; served at almost every possible level in the hierarchy of the Methodist Episcopal Church; and also worked as an Indian agent. He had the rare distinction of serving in both the War of 1812 and the War Between the States. This brief study provides insight into the important yet unglamorous work of a frontier Methodist itinerant preacher. It was men like Brunson who not only built the American Methodist Church, but also carried civilization into the teeming wilderness.

Brunson was born in 1793 in Danbury, Connecticut of an old New England family that had accompanied the noted Puritan divine Thomas Hooker to America in 1633. Apprenticed to a shoemaker uncle at an early age, Brunson fled that life after several disagreements with his master. After a brief attempt at studying law in Ohio, fate brought Brunson to Carlisle, Pennsylvania and his first contact with Methodism. After attending several camp meetings, Brunson "awakened to a sense of my sinful state... and, having started in the good way, my inquiry was, How shall or can I obtain religion?"1

1 Alfred Brunson, A Western Pioneer: or Incidents in the Life and Times of Rev. Alfred Brunson, Embracing a Period of Over Seventy Years, 2 Vols. (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden; New York: Carlton and Lanahan, 1872, 1879), I, p. 47.
After wrenching self-debate, Brunson made a decision which radically altered his life’s course — to accept the call to preach. “I gave up all my early projects for the law and military glory, and devoted my studies to a preparation for the work before me.” Joining the church on 2 April 1809, Brunson received a license to exhort in 1810. The following year Brunson married one of his first converts, Eunice Burr, a third cousin of the controversial and colorful American military man and politician.

After serving with distinction in the War of 1812, Brunson returned to pursue his ministerial career. In 1815 he received a license to preach. Officially ordained in 1819, Brunson shortly thereafter started to ride the circuit, principally in Western Pennsylvania and Ohio. He rapidly acquired a reputation as a “stiff old side” who ruled his district with a “rod of iron.” In 1829, Brunson had the honor of preaching to a congregation that contained president-elect Andrew Jackson. While Jackson’s presence was an intimidation to many men, it did not affect Brunson in the least: “I made no allusions to him,” Brunson later recalled, “nor any apologies, . . . indeed, I preached to him as I would to any other sinner.”

Brunson’s last “Eastern” circuit was centered around Meadsville, Pennsylvania. In 1833, he was named the district’s presiding elder. It was there also that Brunson influenced the re-opening of Allegheny College as a Methodist-controlled institution. He served the college for several years as a member of its Board of Trustees.

In 1835, the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church met in Pittsburgh. At that meeting, Brunson mounted the conference stage and proposed that the church fund a mission to the Indians of the wilderness region called “Wisconsin,” which still remained a part of territorial Michigan and a veritable wilderness. By the 1830s, the once-flourishing Wisconsin fur trade had entered into a decline. The old traders had acquired new pursuits: land speculation, townsite promotion, and mining. By 1829, several thousand lead miners lived in the region. Yet Wisconsin in the 1830s was still a principle domain of the Native American — the thousands of Indians who still practiced their traditional lifestyle free from white interference. In Brunson’s vision, both the Indian and the many unlettered white pioneers would be the targets of his proposed mission.

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2 Ibid., p. 58, 99.
3 Ibid., pp. 334, 344-345.
Of course, the idea of sending missions to Indians was not new in the 1830s. The previous decade witnessed a tremendous upsurge in organized religion's interest in the Indian's fate. Both Catholics and Protestants actively entered the missionary field. The Missionary and Bible Society of the Methodist Church in America was founded in 1820 to send missionaries and bibles as "messengers of peace to gather in the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The missionary zeal of the 1830s was inextricably bound with the Jacksonian era reform movements. Prohibition, utopian projects, and abolition were other manifestations of this broad-based movement.

Protestant missionary work in this period rested upon the supposition that true civilization could not exist apart from Christianity. The Westward Movement inspired the belief that the idea of progress pointed toward a future modeled upon the white way of life. Thus, America's Manifest Destiny, if not mission, was to spread superior Anglo-Saxon institutions into the Western wilderness. In the words of the noted missionary to the Sioux, Stephen Riggs: "As tribes and nations the Indians must perish and live only as men! With this impression of the tendency of God's purposes... I would labor to prepare them to fall into Christian civilization that is destined to cover the earth."

Brunson, like Riggs and other missionaries of the era, believed that the most efficient method for effecting the transformation from a savage to a civilized state was through the introduction of agriculture. For above all forms of work, the missionaries reasoned, farming received God's smile. It encouraged private property, thus spurring industry. Agriculture also provided a stable basis for an organized society and civil government. Missionaries of the 1830s saw rural life as providing the proper social foundation for their ultimate goal of a self-supporting church.

Following the Pittsburgh Conference of 1835, Brunson was asked by Bishop Robert R. Roberts, one of the church's Illinois Conference leaders, to recommend several men for the position of missionary to the Wisconsin region. After Brunson had complied with this request, Roberts remarked: "These are good men, but I want you to go. We want older men in that country — men of experience and wisdom." After another serious and searching internal debate, Brunson yielded to the fresh challenge and arranged a transfer to the Illinois Conference.

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10Ibid., p. 7.
11Ibid., p. 70.
Brunson began making immediate preparations for his mission. After examining a map of the region, he reasoned that the best location for the proposed mission would be either Prairie du Chien or St. Anthony's Falls. In a letter to Secretary of War Lewis Cass, Brunson told of his proposed mission while also asking permission to enter the Indian country. Brunson’s brash enthusiasm is readily sensed in this excerpt:

We intend to throw ourselves among them — learn their language as soon as possible, converse with them by their fire sides — sleep in their wigwams, hold the plow, the ax, the hoe, the scythe with them, and preach Christ Jesus to them as the way of salvation. Thus like Peter the Great, by example as well as precept, raise the barbarians into improved citizens.

But perhaps Brunson's most stunning suggestion to Cass was his solicitation of the office of Indian agent. This, of course, would be in addition to his already trying missionary duties. Fortunately, Cass had the sense to realize Brunson's or any other individual's inability to adequately perform both jobs, so he refused Brunson's offer. The Secretary of War, however, approved Brunson's request to enter the territory and begin missionary work.

After one brief visit to the new territory, Brunson returned home to move his family. In the spring of 1836 the missionary loaded his family, a half-built house, and all of his worldly goods upon a keelboat. The family then floated down the Allegheny River to the Ohio which took them to St. Louis. In St. Louis, a steamer was hired to tow the boat to Prairie du Chien in the Wisconsin wilderness.

An examination of Brunson's first year in the young territory offers a revealing glimpse into the trials and hardships of a frontier itinerant preacher. After arriving in the Prairie du Chien region, it suddenly occurred to Brunson, "How will I communicate with the savages?" He desperately needed to obtain the services of an interpreter, but the mission had not foreseen a need to budget for one. After scanning the Prairie du Chien region, Brunson found an ideal prospect for interpreter in the person of James Thompson, a mulatto slave owned by one of nearby Fort Crawford's officers. Although slavery was prohibited by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, no apparent effort was made at this early date to enforce it on the distant frontier.
To Brunson, Thompson was an ideal prospect. He had lived in the West for seven years; he was married to a Sioux woman and could speak the local dialect. Brunson approached Thompson's owner but the slave's master asked the high sum of $1200, far beyond Brunson's allocated funds. Yet Brunson desperately needed an interpreter. Furthermore, Thompson "possessed qualifications for interpreting... that I could find in no other person on the frontier." He was also "pious and quite intelligent." After deep thought, Brunson devised a scheme for Thompson's purchase.¹⁵

Brunson wrote to the recently established Cincinnati-based Methodist publication, *The Western Christian Advocate*¹⁶, to plea for the urgent necessity of providing his mission with an interpreter. Brunson asked:

Here I am between the living God and a dead heathen race, whom I can not approach for the want of an interpreter. But God, in his providence, has provided one [Thompson] if the money to purchase his freedom could be had. Will not the friends of freedom and of the poor Indian raise the amount, separately from the Missionary collections?¹⁷

In his autobiography, Brunson reported that his plea to the *Advocate* moved the "hearts and souls of the people,"¹⁸ and donations soon showered the journal's Cincinnati office.¹⁹ However, the noted Presbyterian missionary, Stephen R. Riggs, believed a deeper reason than religious philanthropy lay behind the enthusiastic response to Brunson's request:

This was a time when the anti-slavery feeling was highest in Ohio, and multitudes of people were only too glad to contribute to the fund that was started in Cincinnati for the purpose of obtaining for James Thompson his liberty... no doubt this transaction had a good result in keeping the anti-slavery fires burning brightly.²⁰

William Blake, a recent student of Wisconsin Methodism, reported that donations "trickled in" for over five months until the necessary $1,200 was accumulated. On March 14, 1837, Brunson obtained

¹⁷Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, II, p. 64.
¹⁸Ibid.
¹⁹Ibid.
Thompson’s deed of emancipation and he happily wrote the Advocate that Thompson “was now a member of my family.”

In the fall of 1836 Brunson became embroiled in another controversy when he attended the annual meeting of the Illinois Conference in Rushville, Illinois. At that convention, Brunson, the brash newcomer, settled into a heated theological debate with the vaunted “King” of the Illinois Conference, Peter Cartwright. Cartwright, one of the most significant forces in the advance of Methodism across the Old Northwest, proved to be a formidable foe for Brunson.

Brunson’s reputation for strictness and outspokenness preceded his arrival in the West. In his autobiography, Brunson claimed that “King” Cartwright emerged second best in the verbal joustings. After this conference, Brunson acquired a nickname which followed him for his remaining days. As Brunson recalled: “... from my daring to question some of the notions and, as I thought, whims of their king [Cartwright], some of his liege friends gave me the appellation of ... “King Alfred.”

After Conference, the harsh Wisconsin winter bore down upon Brunson and his family. However, Brunson kept busy by making preparations to enter the Indian country at the first sign of spring. In May, Brunson, accompanied by two aides, caught the first steamer heading north. The river-travelers finally reached Fort Snelling where Brunson sought out the post’s commander, Colonel Davenport, and obtained permission to establish his mission. With this accomplished, Brunson traveled to Chief Little Crow’s encampment six miles below the fort with the intention of starting a mission there.

With Little Crow’s consent, work on the mission commenced. After a house had been constructed and a garden planted, Brunson left the mission under the direction of an aide, the Reverend David King, and returned downstream to visit other remote parts of his vast district. In Prairie du Chien he rendezvoused with three young Chippewa (Ojibway) men who had been previously converted to Methodism as children in Canada. Brunson took the three Indians with him upstream (a trip of several hundred miles) to aid in the mission work. The hard work exhibited by the Chippewas astonished the Sioux, traditional enemies of the Ojibway. Brunson believed he had capitalized on a potentially

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21Blake, Cross and Flame, pp. 34-35.
23Brunson, A Western Pioneer, II, p. 66.
24Between present day Minneapolis and St. Paul.
25Brunson’s Sioux mission was located near the elder Little Crow’s camp, at the present site of South St. Paul, Minnesota. Little Crow was the father of the more famous Little Crow, the leader of the Great Sioux Uprising in Southwest Minnesota in 1862.
dangerous situation by bringing the Sioux's age-old enemy to the mission. By seeing how good civilization had treated these three, the Sioux, Brunson reasoned, would want to emulate them.  

In September of 1837, Brunson rounded off a busy first year in the field by attending an important treaty conference held at Fort Snelling. Brunson and three of his "Chippewa boys" attended the treaty talks and assisted with the interpreting. He proudly displayed the threesome "as specimens of the fruit of missionary labor among the Indians." The treaty commissioner, Governor Dodge, upon meeting the boys expressed his delight, insisting that they were the first fruits of Christian missions he had ever seen in his years among the Indians.

After the treaty talk, it was annual conference time again; Brunson's first year in the field had concluded. It had been a year of both exasperation and exhilaration for this pioneer Methodist missionary. Brunson continued to serve as a missionary for several more years until he accepted an equally arduous assignment as Indian agent for northwestern Wisconsin. However for many years afterward, Brunson served the Methodist Church in a number of offices.

It was men like Brunson who battled the remote Old Northwestern frontier and carried to it the torch of civilization. Itinerant Methodist preachers, riding endless frontier circuits, performed a far greater service in carrying civilization than has been generally recognized. Brunson and others like him carried books and taught people to read. They insisted upon Bible reading as a mark of Christian piety; and they preached almost continuously in behalf of public education.

Religion in general, and in particular Methodism, was a powerful factor in forming the civilization of Wisconsin and the Old Northwest Territory. One prominent scholar has argued that religion was the most effective institution for carrying traditional civilization Westward. It is also difficult to dispute his assertion that the civilizing influence of the frontier Methodist preacher is incalculable.

By examining the lives of individual frontier preachers like Alfred Brunson, scholars will begin to sense the significant contribution of the missionary frontier to the civilization of the American West.

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 168.
32 Ibid., p. 174.