COLORADO'S JOSHUA:
JOHN CHIVINGTON'S FORGOTTEN YEARS, 1860-1861
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"Emigrant Arrivals: May 17 1860 John M. Chivington and family, and three others. Nebraska City." The first Presiding Elder of the Rocky Mountain District of the Methodist Episcopal Church had come to the bustling young town of Denver, a part of Pike's Peak gold country that still lacked nine months of being named Colorado. A year before the famous Pike's Peak gold rush had sent 100,000 people westward to "get rich without working" panning gold in the new El Dorado. Most had long since returned home, but more came the same season the Chivington party did.

Sent westward to expand Methodism, John Chivington would do that and more in the next few years; Chivington and Colorado—the juxtaposition of the two names evokes strong feelings to this day. Unfortunately he is more remembered for commanding the troops that attacked an Indian camp at Sand Creek on a bleak November day in 1864 than for his Methodist work. The Sand Creek controversy, tragically, has all but erased everything he accomplished before that day, particularly his service as a Methodist minister and as a Presiding Elder of the Rocky Mountain District, then part of the Kansas Conference. He came to a land of opportunity, one where the determined and the fortunate could prosper; ambitious Chivington matched the times, and he knew the people he came to lead.

Who was John Chivington? Historians have been trying to find the answer to that question for years. One of the best contemporary accounts appeared in the *Central Christian Advocate*, April 10, 1861, which described his appearance at the Annual Conference in Atchison, Kansas:

Glance at the Rocky Mountain district, with Bro. Chivington for presiding elder, whose residence is Denver City. He is over six feet high, with all the full proportions of the best formed human being, from the crown of the head to the soles of his feet. His intellect is strong, and well trained for his work. He could readily take two ordinary men, one in each hand, and knock their heads together, were he assaulted or disposed to engage in such achievement. At first sight he would appear as if he were too sturdy in his make of body and mind, to have any sympathy. But further acquaintance will soon show that he has all the fine feelings of human sympathy. He can, and does weep with those that weep, and rejoices with those that rejoice. His cloak or traveling mantle has the inside of strong green baize, and reaches just below the hips. The outside is made of the skins of the Rocky Mountain wolves—a light gray color. A row of these wolf tails dangles from each shoulder, in two rows down to the lower edge of his Rocky Mountain mantle, for such we will call it.

He actually stood 6 ft. 4½ in., towering over everyone else there. Clad in that wolfskin mantle, he must have been particularly conspicuous at that conference amid his more conservatively dressed Methodist brethren. Forty-year-old John Chivington was accustomed to standing out in a crowd; he never “lighted his lamp and put it under a bushel.”

Born in nearly frontier circumstances in Warren County, Ohio, Chivington spent almost his entire life on the edge of settlement. Nothing from his youth and early adulthood separates Chivington from hundreds of other young men. He entered the family lumbering business, was married at nineteen, and soon had a family of three children to support. In the meantime (1842), the young Ohioan “found God” in a conversion experience at a Methodist revival meeting. The evangelist’s call for soldiers to fight for righteousness especially impressed him. Always a fighter, John determined to enter the ministry and launched himself on a two-year home study course under the direction of his bishop.

After ordination in 1844, the new minister followed the traditional path of two-year appointments, moving steadily west from Ohio to Illinois and finally to the Missouri Conference. He went into communities where Methodism had a weak hold and built up the congregations, a nineteenth-century version of a denominational troubleshooter. The years 1853-54 found Chivington near today’s Kansas City as missionary to the Wyandotte Indians. He apparently did a good job there. On a tour of inspection in July 1854, Presiding Elder William Goode was “impressed” by what he saw at the mission. Chivington’s years there coincided with the heightening of tension over the slavery question. The issue centered on whether neighboring Kansas Territory would be slave or free soil. Already the Methodist Church had split on the issue into northern and southern factions, and even the Wyandottes were divided into two congregations. So deep were the animosities that each faction built its own church. Both buildings eventually burned under mysterious circumstances. Always an outspoken anti-slavery, pro-Union man, Chivington found himself in a Missouri minority. Hostile congregations failed to awe him, however. He preached what was termed “muscular Christianity,” a task made easier, no doubt, by his physical height, which allowed him to look down upon the average man of 5 ft. 6 in. or so.

Transferred to the new Kansas-Nebraska Conference in 1856, Chivington found himself in a more congenial atmosphere among settlers with

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2Central Christian Advocate, April 10, 1861. Rocky Mountain News, Nov. 14, 1860. See also Isaac Beardsley, Echoes from Peak and Plain (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings, 1898), 240-47.

3James Haynes, History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Omaha and Suburbs (Omaha: Omaha Printing, 1895), 44.

4Chivington’s ministerial career exemplifies this. See Beardsley, Echoes, 242-44 and John Chivington, “The Prospector,” Bancroft Library, 8-10.
Union sympathies. Still preaching on the frontier, his life must have been much like that of his fellow Methodist, William Goode, who ministered in the same region and was so "impressed" by Chivington's work that he had him appointed to the church at Omaha. This mission work, Goode wrote in his *Outposts of Zion*, quickly tested the "nerve and caliber" of the ministers who traveled and preached to small scattered congregations. Few rewards accrued to these dedicated Methodist ministers, who were always fewer than necessary to satisfy all the local needs. Some broke under the work and pressure, but not Chivington. He thrived on adversity and was appointed Presiding Elder of the Omaha District, above the "Great Platte."

During his years in this conference, Chivington held a variety of positions: chairman of the Conference Board of Stewards, member of the Conference Board of Examiners, member of the committee of education, and selection by the Bishop in 1857 to preach the annual missionary sermon. In 1859 Chivington changed districts, moving as Presiding Elder to the Nebraska City District.

The news of the Pike's Peak gold rush stirred everyone's imagination that spring. Following the Methodist circuit riding heritage, Goode and Jacob Adriance journeyed west to look after the members who had been lured to the mines. Chivington must have felt the call of that new frontier, but he turned steadfastly to the duties in his new district. The following year, in 1860, the Annual Conference created the Rocky Mountain District and appointed the veteran Chivington Presiding Elder. His budget for the coming year was $4,000. A quarter of that was for his salary and district expenses, the remainder for other ministers who, it was hoped, would be found to man the outposts.

Chivington was an ideal choice for the new Rocky Mountain District. Having survived and prospered under trying times, he had acquired the experience to establish Methodism firmly in the gold fields. He relished hard work and travel, knew how to organize and run a scattered district, had displayed leadership abilities, and was "... a power for good, as he was a strong preacher." The man and his future had met.

He left Nebraska City with his family and household goods packed into two mule-drawn wagons. Undaunted by meeting the "faint hearted, the fearful and unbelieving"—those disappointed goldseekers returning

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6 "History of the Reverends John M. and Isaac Chivington," taken from minutes of the Annual Conferences, 1856-70, typed copy Western History Department, Denver Public Library, 1-2.
7 The preceding was found in Minutes of the Kansas-Nebraska Conference 1860 and Kansas Conference 1861, Methodist Episcopal Church, xerox copies in author's possession.
to the east—the little group pushed on. Within fifteen miles of Denver, they met an old friend, who advised them to turn back because they had entered on a "wild goose chase." Chivington was not one to follow that kind of advice.9

The Denver to which the family arrived was just planting its feet on the ground after a tumultuous birth. Goode had helped establish Methodism the previous year, in 1859, then had returned to the east. With other Methodist ministers and laymen ready to assist him, it was now up to Chivington to build upon that foundation. The energetic Presiding Elder announced that he would do just that throughout his whole district.10 After preaching in Denver, getting his family settled, and starting construction on a brick home which the Rocky Mountain News, August 8, hailed as a "very neat little brick residence," Chivington set out for the mountains. Denver, the region's business heart, would be his base, but his flock remained scattered throughout the gold regions in search of the mineral that had enticed them west in the first place.

His mountain tour stretched from June into August, taking him to Central City, Tarryall, Buckskin Joe, Breckenridge, California Gulch, and places in between, over rugged mountainous roads that hardly deserved the name. Upon reaching a mining district, Chivington found a frontier the likes of which even he had never seen before—a transitory (camps sometimes boomed and died within a season), materialistic, fast-paced life that virtually dared the church to change it.

Undeterred Chivington pushed ahead. Methodist ministers had already preached in Gregory Diggings, the most famous of the gold districts. Small settlements gave the area an air of permanence: Central City, Black Hawk, Nevada City, and Mountain City. In the last named, Chivington presided over a quarterly meeting in late June, the first ever held in the mountains. According to the News' correspondent, a "large and very intelligent congregation of not less than one thousand persons" gathered; among them were at least "thirty finely dressed and finely appearing ladies." This contrasted greatly, he went on to say, with the usual Sunday scenes: "How rapid is the change and how beneficial the influence of such meetings. We hail them with great pleasure as the first gleam of the dawn of civilization."11

These accolades pleased Chivington, but he could not tarry to savor them. Travel he must, preaching and organizing; that had been his heritage for a decade. At California Gulch, then enjoying its first fame as a placer gold district, Chivington found a great need for a church and organized a Methodist Society, held a quarterly conference, and, as he said, "set

10 Rocky Mountain News, May 23, 1860.
11 Rocky Mountain News (weekly), June 27, 1860.
the matter to work in good shape.” Back in Denver again, he faced the formidable task of recruiting and retaining ministers in the field.

The isolation, transitory population, long circuits, and low salary called for only the most dedicated and determined men. What Chivington needed, a score of men like himself, was not to be found. A minister at Central City abruptly “pulled up and out for the flesh pots of Egypt.” Another, an able preacher, was unfortunately “engaged in secular pursuits, he did but little church work, except to preach, and consequently his success was not what it otherwise might have been.” A third labored faithfully and successfully until he suddenly, without notifying his Presiding Elder, returned to his home in Nebraska.

The presence of a wife and family did not guarantee a longer tenure. Some women could not, or would not, adjust to the mining frontier, and the husband then found himself weighed down with an extra burden. Chivington seems to have had little trouble in this respect, he dominated his family life, and his wife appears to have followed her husband dutifully wherever he went.

Chivington understood that the frontier church made extraordinary demands on a minister. Having been through the fire himself, he knew that men often failed to meet these demands. Nevertheless, the mission of Methodism was damaged when they caved in and decamped. A less determined individual might have considered giving up too, but Chivington never did. Later he observed, “A church with less zeal, less complete in its organization, less elastic in its operations, and less adapted to such changing circumstances and conditions, could not have rendered the needed service.”

The Presiding Elder was determined to render those needed services. He tirelessly organized and preached in Denver and continued to travel, establishing and encouraging Methodist congregations throughout the district. A swing through Colorado City (where Colorado Springs one day would be) had him holding the usual quarterly meeting and encountering “as singular a specimen of humanity as I ever found.” “A good man, no doubt, but a little cranky,” this individual kept Saturday for the Sabbath and then kept Sunday out of respect for his neighbors. Converted on the trip across the plains, the man now insisted that Chivington baptize him by immersion. So on Sunday afternoon they went to the river, joined by “all the citizens and strangers of and in Colorado City.”

In Idaho Springs, on another occasion, Chivington could not locate a place to preach and was about to give up when a “generous saloon/

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gambling house keeper came to me and said if I would not be insulted he would tender me his place to preach in." The service was announced throughout the community, and people who had never been in the building before came to worship. Admonished by his host not to be "too tedious," Chivington preached "the best I could." On this or some other occasion a saloonkeeper told him, "I do not expect you to go out of your way to abuse my business; but I do not wish you to soften your words nor smooth your tongue to spare me or my business." That man obviously did not know his minister very well. Chivington did not mince his words and on drinking stood foursquare: ". . . we were then, and would be now and will be in all future time, better off without any who are tipplers in the church." 16

Preaching in saloons and gambling halls was not extraordinary in those times and places. Those businesses frequently offered the best and largest buildings in the camp. Games and drinking stopped at the appointed hour, and the minister had the floor for his allotted time. A frontier clergyman had to be able to adjust to unusual circumstances and be able to meet his people, who came from all walks of life, on their own ground. No doctrinaire, unbending, authoritarian individual need apply. That kind invariably failed in Colorado and elsewhere.

The rewards could be great if patience underlay one's character. Years later, in the early 1880's, Chivington met a woman in Denver who asked him if he remembered the time he preached in a saloon. That service had touched her — she "was awakened and converted as a result of that meeting held in a saloon." Once in a while what seemed a disappointment at the time marked an auspicious occasion. Only one man attended one of Chivington's announced prayer meetings, but neither the minister's time nor effort proved to be wasted. The "total" congregation eventually became a Methodist clergyman. 17

Ministers took unexpected events in stride and persevered. While in Denver, Chivington and the rector of the Episcopal Church prayed with a murderer about to be hanged. 18 Denver continued rough around the edges, even with Chivington and his fellow clergy working hard to bring the "dawn of civilization."

A church building could speed the coming of that day. It was good for the civic image (along with a school and court house) and made an attractive community addition for both visitors and new settlers. Chivington canvassed the city in November 1860 to raise subscriptions to build a Methodist Episcopal Church (proposed to be brick, Romanesque style architecture), supported wholeheartedly by editor William Byers of the

Rocky Mountain News. In an ecumenical outreach, this dedicated Methodist found funds to donate $100 to Bishop Joseph Machebeuf for a Catholic convent. The often strident, denominational world of contemporary Colorado church life witnessed too few examples of such cooperation.

Hardly without stopping, he preached wherever a congregation gathered—Mrs. Woods’ schoolroom, the Herald building—and never ignored the children, working hard to nurture the budding Sunday schools. Methodism was taking hold.

In the midst of this activity the staunch Union advocate watched with concern what was happening back in the states as the slavery and sectional issues reached a dead end in the 1860 presidential election. The Republican party nominated Abraham Lincoln as its candidate and, with the Democrats bitterly fractured, stood a good chance of winning. Slaveholding southerners could not tolerate such a possibility and vowed to secede if the “black hearted abolitionist” won. It is easy to understand where Chivington stood in this matter—he was a Republican through and through. Though unable to vote (territorial residents were not eligible), Denver Republicans organized and held a mass rally in November. A huge bonfire warmed and illuminated the brisk event as 300 people cheered Old Abe and Republicans, sang songs, and heard speeches, one given by the Rev. Mr. Chivington. A keg of powder ended the evening with a bang. The war horse from Missouri and Nebraska found himself very much at home in this gathering of true believers.

Chivington looked back over 1860 with pride: it was “a profitable season of worship.” Others concurred, including editor Byers, who contrasted the “church going privileges” between December 1859 and December 1860. Where only the Methodists had been established previously, now the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Catholics, and Methodists—both north and south—were holding worship services. Denver was coming of age.

What did the Presiding Elder have to show for all his hard work? When winter descended on the mountains, mining slowed to a stop and many people fled to lower elevations. Some districts had already become victims of declining gold deposits and more attractive new places to scurry to with great expectations. It was hard to establish any kind of congregation under such circumstances. On Christmas Day 1860 the Mountain City church opened, but the log building at California Gulch stood nearly forsaken that winter. By the next spring the district itself was showing signs of decline, its day as a major placer mining district finished.

19Machebeuf to Marius, April 15, 1867, Archives of the Archdiocese of Denver, Box 59.
20For the preceding, see the Rocky Mountain News (weekly), Nov. 7, 1860 and the daily, Nov. 13, 20, & 24 and Dec. 1, 1860.
The morals and religion of miners and mining camps were subjects of controversy, even in the early days of the Pike's Peak excitement. Goode observed in 1859 that, though the church had great work to do, the morals of the Rocky Mountain miners deserved a tribute. Conversely, in the August 29, 1860 issue of the News, a correspondent known only as Omega wrote from California Gulch:

Drunkenness and fighting have been the order of the day during the past week. The most disgraceful scenes upon our streets are matters of everyday occurrence. If Denver and California Gulch are fair exponents of the morality of Jefferson Territory [an extra-legal territory that half-heartedly functioned in 1860-61], we had better apply for admission into the Union under the title of the “State of Moral Depravity.”

No wonder Chivington had work to do up there! Yet another correspondent, in April 1861, claimed that Gold Hill society (above Boulder) was “composed of intelligent and honorable [people] and unsurpassed in all the mining region for good order and morality.”

In these circumstances it is understandable that the Presiding Elder and his clergy scored some success as well as faced failures. Mining camps were not so “wild” as imagined, nor as “settled” as their homegrown boosters liked to proclaim. Realizing this, a minister had to accept what he found and build on it, knowing that tomorrow a new rush might carry his congregation off to other places. Transient populations and a shifting economic base urged caution before launching a church building program.

In March 1861 Chivington, attired in his wolf tail cloak, journeyed back to Kansas to attend the Annual Conference. He left behind a better organized and stronger Methodist district than the one he had found when he arrived the previous May. The writer in the Central Christian Advocate, however, was still justified in exclaiming, “What a field this is! And these hardy pioneers [ministers] look as contented and happy as they can breathe.”

The challenges remained great, the needs almost beyond the ability of Chivington to fulfill. He was reappointed and five other men joined him, filling pulpits at Denver, Central City, Colorado City, Tarryall, and a combined Golden and Boulder. Sunday Schools were active in Denver, Golden, Boulder and Blue River. $3,000 was appropriated to support work in the Rocky Mountain District. These were certainly steps in the right direction. Lest the conference cheer too loudly, though, ten places remained “to be supplied.”

Colorado Methodism conceived ambitious plans for the upcoming year, including appointing a man to the newly opened San Juan mines, the most isolated, mountainous region in the territory. They were over-extending themselves; no minister ever served there in the 1860s or permanently in most of the other nine locations. The circuit-riding Methodist

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22 Rocky Mountain News (weekly), April 17, 1861.
23 Kansas Conference Minutes 1861, 9, 20, 26, & 29. Rocky Mountain News, April 17, 1861.
preacher tried to cover as much territory and meet as many people as possible, in hopes of cultivating a permanent congregation. Too few men however, tried to cover too much territory.

Chivington returned to Colorado in late April. The stage trip home had been enlivened by a traveling Presbyterian minister, who reprimanded John for using such slang words and phrases as "skedaddle, get up and dust, and go along and brindle." Inclement spring weather had put the road in poor condition, jarring passengers and overturning the stage, injuring Chivington, who hobbled off in Denver on crutches. Unfazed by either the injury or his verbal dressing down, he preached the very next Sunday.24

The Colorado he came back to was changed, and not just in name. The cannons were roaring back east and the war had started. The after-shock reached Denver and the mountains, where sides had already been chosen. Over a thousand people turned out on April 26, the day before Chivington returned, for a union rally called by Byers and the News. Emotions flared, rumors flourished, and threats had been made by both sides. It was the earlier Missouri years all over again for the Presiding Elder, who was not one to stay neutral.

According to Chivington's recollection, during his first sermon after returning from the conference he quoted Stephen Douglas: "There be but two parties—patriots and traitors." That statement created a very "decided sensation in the audience."25 In his opinion Christians could choose only the Union cause.

In the months ahead his church work gradually took second place to his concern for preserving the Federal Union and protecting Colorado from invasion. The minister became a warrior/prophet in the Old Testament sense of the word; given the situation and his background, no other development could have been expected.

Meanwhile, political and military events moved rapidly in Colorado. Governor William Gilpin and other territorial officials arrived to establish government and learn about this land and people to whom they had been sent. A concerned Gilpin, equally as dedicated to the northern cause as Chivington, became convinced that Colorado stood nearly defenseless and must raise her own troops to save herself. He saw Confederates, real and imagined, at every turn of the road and soon authorized the organization of the First Regiment of Colorado Volunteers. Major John M. Chivington was listed by the News on September 2 among its officers.

What Chivington had been doing in the preceding months is not very clear. Quickly recovering from his injuries, John took a hurried trip to Central City in mid-May; after that, a specific trail of his activities disappears. Chivington would call 1861 the "busiest year of my life," as he

24Rocky Mountain News (weekly), May 1, 1861. Chivington quoted in Beardsley, Echoes, 242 & 244-45.
held meetings and services on the weekends and made recruiting speeches and drilled troops the rest of the time. He was in Buckskin Joe in July and later, on August 2, was installed as the grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Masons of Colorado Territory, thus continuing an involvement with that organization that extended back before his Wyandotte missionary days.26

This dynamic, determined Unionist explained why he made the decision to become involved in the military. It says a great deal about the man:

I was . . . an American citizen before I became a minister, and that if the Church had required me to renounce any of my right of manhood or American Citizenship before I could become her minister, I should have very respectfully declined.27

It was a time, he went on, “in the early sixties [when] no half-way measures of doubtful positions were to avail in Colorado.” The Rev. Mr. Chivington now became the Rev. Major, then Colonel, a change much more significant than mere words can convey.

Within a few months Chivington and the First Colorado would be off to New Mexico to repel a Confederate force marching up the Rio Grande. He returned a hero, the Presiding Elder days behind, a military career ahead.

In the slightly more than sixteen months he served as an active leader of the Rocky Mountain District, Chivington had performed well. Reports to the Annual Conferences of 1860 and 1861 provide these statistics:

1860: 27 members, 35 probationers, 1 local preacher
1861: 348 members, 43 probationers, 17 local preachers, 3 churches;
7 Sunday schools, 59 officers and teachers, 212 scholars

Methodism was permanently organized in several communities, circuit riders reached out to others, and a solid foundation had been laid for future growth. Susan Ashley heard him preach in November 1861; she never forgot the experience: “In the pulpit . . . was a parson in military clothes who preached a rousing patriotic sermon.” Irving Howbert, who came to Colorado with his Methodist minister father, remembered Chivington’s commanding presence, his unusual energy and ability, and his force of character.28 John Chivington could have asked no more.

Given a different set of circumstances, Chivington might have remained in the Methodist ministry, but the times weighed against it for a man of his temperament. Activist, fighter, leader, strong willed, physically domineering, undaunted by opposition or obstacle—trails which had

carried him to Colorado—now converged on a single issue, preserving the Union, one of his great passions. Chivington also seems to have been exceedingly ambitious, not an unknown trait among ministers and laypeople who came to Colorado during those years. A successful military career during the war could open many doors of opportunity than a stay-at-home Presiding Elder.

A trace of flamboyancy, of charisma, ran in his veins also, something that drove him to deviate from the normal Methodist ministerial path. Commenting on his earlier one-year pastorate in Omaha, the Rev. James Haynes wrote:

Mr. Chivngton was not as steady in his demeanor as becomes a man called of God to the work of ministry, giving his ministerial friends regret and even trouble in their efforts to sustain his reputation. His suavity and ambition secured for him a great influence over men, both strangers and friends, and if his life had with constancy been that of an exemplary man, his usefulness might have been unlimited.29

Writing in 1895, Haynes unfortunately does not give specific details. No doubt, Chivington made enemies as well as friends along the way; his type of personality appeared such that a neutral stand would be hard to take.

The problems at Omaha could not have been very serious because in 1868 Chivington was re-admitted to that conference and appointed Agent of the Nebraska Extension Society.30 The Rev. David Marquette wrote a history of the Nebraska Conference long after these events transpired. He described Chivington as “... one of those strong, forceful characters who find it difficult to either control themselves or to subject themselves to the requirements of a church.” But for these defects he would have been a “... power for good, as he was a strong preacher and possessed many of the elements which constitute a successful leadership.”31

Thus the strong-willed, aggressive Chivington proved controversial even before Sand Creek. Yet there can be no question but that he provided the dedicated, active leadership needed in 1860-61 to develop Colorado Methodism on a firm foundation. The respected John Dyer, one of his co-workers and the man who eventually reached most of those mountain Methodists, highly praised Chivington’s efforts on behalf of Methodism; so did Howbert.32

With all his strengths and weaknesses John Chivington left his mark on Colorado. It has been forgotten too quickly that the first thing he accomplished was firmly to establish Methodism in a territory only a step away from a mountain wilderness. Others would build on the firm foundation he left; his heritage. Methodism has been a strong Colorado denomination since those hectic days of 1860-1861.

29Haynes, History.
30“History of the Reverends . . . Chivington,” 5. His brother Isaac had been removed from the ministry by the Nebraska Annual Conference in 1861 on a series of charges, see 3-5.
31Marquette, History, 57-58.