

**THE HEAVENLY TWINS:
THE LIVES AND MINISTRIES OF
WILLIAM VAN ORSDEL (“BROTHER VAN”) AND THOMAS ILIFF**

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Two young Methodist Episcopal ministers met for the first time in 1873 and a friendship of forty-five years followed. That friendship was most evident in their work together in 1870s Montana, on occasion when Iliff was in Montana to dedicate or raise money for the creation/building of a local church with “Brother Van,” or at the General Conferences to which they were elected as delegates, or attended, from 1876 to 1916. Their ministries would encompass two territories and future states: Montana and Utah.

I

Thomas C. Iliff was born in McLuney, Ohio, October 26, 1845, the fourth child, third son of a family of seven (five sons and two daughters) of Wesley Iliff (1814–1883) and Harriett Teal (1818–1872).¹ His elementary education included four months per year in school and eight months on the farm.²

A veteran of the Civil War, he enlisted on October 15, 1862 as a private and a member of the 9th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry, Company A, and was discharged on July 20, 1865.³ He served with General Philip Sheridan in sixty engagements, including the march to the sea in Georgia and through the Carolinas.⁴

Iliff enrolled at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, graduating in 1870. An honorary Doctor of Divinity degree was conferred on him by both Ohio and De Pauw Universities in 1887.⁵ Married to Mary Robinson on March 22, 1871, in Belpre, Ohio, their children included one son and three daughters. Three others died in infancy.⁶

¹James Gillilan, *Thomas Corwin Iliff* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1919), 21.

²Gillilan, 22.

³Gillilan, 22, 170; Henry Merkel, *The History of Methodism in Utah* (Colorado Springs, CO: Dentan Publishing Co., 1938), 62.

⁴Gillilan, 22.

⁵Gillilan, 22, 24.

⁶Gillilan, 24–25; Merkel, 62.

Admitted on trial as a minister in the Ohio Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church, in 1870, he was appointed junior minister on the Coolville (Ohio) Circuit with twelve preaching points.⁷

Three months later (1871) he was appointed Missionary to the Rocky Mountains, stationed at Missoula, Montana Territory, population 100. The Iliffs made 2,000 miles of the trip by rail, and 800 miles by stage. They spent the summer in Helena, Montana, then moved to Missoula.⁸ “With his own hands and money from his salary,” people’s contributions, and \$500 from the Methodist Episcopal Board of Church Extension, he built the Missoula church, the first Protestant church between Helena and Walla Walla, WA.⁹ Transferred from the Ohio Conference to the Rocky Mountain Conference at the 1872 meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah Territory,¹⁰ he was ordained an elder in 1873.

Appointed to the Bozeman (Montana) Circuit that year, he also served as Presiding Elder in southeast Montana (1874–1875).¹¹ In 1876, he was transferred to the Utah Conference.¹² Appointed Presiding Elder of the Salt Lake District, with the office in Salt Lake City, he served from 1876–1880.¹³

Elected a ministerial delegate to the 1880 General Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, he was instructed to ask that Utah be reduced to Mission status. Approval was given.¹⁴

Transferred to the Illinois Conference, he was appointed the minister in Bloomington in 1880. Later, that year, for a year, he took the supernumerary relation to travel with Bishop Stephen Merrill in Europe, Egypt and Israel.¹⁵

In 1882, he was appointed back to Utah. Until 1900 he served as superintendent of the Utah Mission, an area that then included all of the Utah Territory, parts of Idaho and the southwestern Wyoming Territories. From 1882–1885 and 1893–1894, he served also as minister of First church, Salt Lake City!¹⁶ The Utah Mission, in 1882, had six churches, five ministers, and 184 members.¹⁷ By 1890, the work had 31 churches, 18 ministers, 25 teachers, and two missionaries.¹⁸

The financial crash of 1893 that dropped the price of silver to rock bottom, caused a tremendous loss of members because so many of them moved

⁷Gillilan, 22.

⁸Merkel, 62.

⁹Gillilan, 24–25; Merkel, 64.

¹⁰Gillilan, 171–172.

¹¹Merkel, 63, 239; Doris Whithorn, *Bi-centennial Tapestry of the Yellowstone Conference*. (Billings, Mt.: Yellowstone Conference Archives and History Commission, 1984), 129.

¹²Gillilan, 138, 172.

¹³Gillilan, 138.

¹⁴Gillilan, 138; Merkel, 67.

¹⁵Gillilan, 23, 172; Merkel, 67–68.

¹⁶Merkel, 106, 248.

¹⁷Merkel, 239.

¹⁸Merkel, 70.

away.¹⁹ However, by 1899, the mission had grown to three districts, 27 appointments and 1,249 members. Church buildings increased from six to 25.²⁰ A year later (1900), Utah had 41 churches, 22 ministers, four mission teachers, five Deaconesses, and nine Women's Home Missionary workers.²¹

Much of Iliff's time was spent fighting the theology of the Mormon church, especially polygamy. For example, in 1888, Iliff was interviewed by the Utah Territory superintendent of schools, a Mr. Bean, a Mormon. Bean wanted to know if Iliff believed the Bible. "Certainly we (Methodists) believe in the Bible. It is the most wonderful book in the world."

"Then," Bean asked, "why do you people persecute us for the practice of our religion?" meaning polygamy. "Doesn't the Bible teach polygamy?" Iliff conceded that such an issue needed skilled interpretation but that it did not encourage the practice of polygamy. Bean quoted Isaiah 4:1: "And seven women will take hold of one man in that day, saying we will eat our own bread, and wear our own apparel: only let us be called by thy name; take thou away our reproach." A crowd was listening with interest. Iliff turned to Bean and replied, "Brother, have you read the preceding chapter?" Bean answered no. Iliff asked the resident Methodist missionary minister, Rev. Emil Mork, to read Isaiah 3:16ff.:

Moreover, Jehovah said, "Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with outstretched necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet; therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and Jehovah will lay bare their secret parts. In that day the Lord will take away the beauty of their anklets, and the cauls, and the crescents; the pendants and the bracelets, and the mufflers; the boxes, and amulets; the rings, and the most jewels; the festival mirrors, and the fine linens and the turbans, and the veils. And it shall come to pass, that instead of sweet spices there shall be rottenness; and instead of a girdle, a rope; and instead of well set hair, baldness; and instead of a robe, a girding of sackcloth; branding instead of beauty

The story presented a terrible scene of men being killed in war and the women in despair. Iliff turned to Bean and said, "Now, my friend, how would you like to have seven old hags of that description that [have] a hold of your coat tail." Bean laughed and shook his head. The Methodist superintendent finished his commentary with, "I will tell I would let them have the coat and I would run for my life." By common consent, they decided Iliff had won.²²

He was instrumental and successful in keeping potential Utah congressman Brigham Roberts from taking office in 1899. The reason: the Protestant community did not want a polygamist in Washington.²³

¹⁹Merkel, 70-71.

²⁰Gillilan, 174.

²¹Gillilan, 174; Merkel, 74.

²²Merkel, 68-70.

²³Gillilan, 23-24, 89; Merkel, 72.

From 1901 to 1909, he was served as assistant secretary of the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension.²⁴ Traveling 40,000 miles annually, more than 300,000 miles total,²⁵ he either dedicated or helped dedicate more than 500 churches and raised more than \$3,000,000.²⁶

Retiring in 1909, he died on February 22, 1918, in the suburb of Denver, Colorado, known as University Park, and was buried on February 27 in Mt. Olive Cemetery in Salt Lake City.²⁷

To understand his preaching style, biographer James Gillilan wrote:

In the pulpit and on the platform, he was the compeller of audiences. Attractive in personal appearance and pleasing in demeanor, he immediately placed his hearers at complete ease while he held them from his first utterance. In stature neither short nor tall, and of sturdy and rather heavy build for his height, especially in the days of his prime, he was the picture of perfect manhood. His tousled hair flying and frequently thrust through with his fingers, he employed his own native and unstudied Iliffian gestures, all of which added immensely to the attractive picturesqueness which always thrilled a crowd.²⁸

II

William Van Orsdel was born on a farm near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on March 20, 1848, the youngest child of seven of William Van Orsdel (?–1858) and Mary Osborn (?–1862). The younger William joined the Methodist Episcopal Church at age 12 and was licensed to exhort at 16.²⁹

He was a witness to the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1–4, 1863) watching from the Confederate General Albert Jenkins' position. Occasionally, while living in Montana, he would tell of that battle in special lectures³⁰ and contribute the proceeds to new churches.

By 1871, he went to work in the oil fields of western Pennsylvania as a stationary engineer. In 1872, he met Bishop Charles McCabe, a cousin of Mary Iliff, who suggested Van Orsdel look to ministering in Montana.³¹ He began his journey west that spring, getting as far as Sioux City, IA, before running out of money. Making further arrangements, he completed his journey on the steam-boat, "Far West," to Fort Benton, Montana Territory, arriving on July 1, 1872.³² Finding a place to preach that afternoon, he led the first Protestant worship service in Fort Benton.

²⁴Gillilan, 172–173; Merkel, 63.

²⁵Gillilan, 24.

²⁶Gillilan, 180.

²⁷Merkel, 63–64; Gillilan, 26; Whithorn, 129.

²⁸Gillilan, 162–163.

²⁹Robert Lind, *Brother Van—Montana Pioneer Circuit Rider* (Helena, Mt.: SkyHouse Publishers, 1992), 14, 15.

³⁰Lind, 19, 21.

³¹Lind, 30–31.

³²Lind, 33–49.

Leaving Fort Benton, Van would spend the next 47 years as a traveling evangelist, minister, district and mission superintendent, all in Montana:

1873: Beaverhead and Jefferson Circuit, Rocky Mountain Conference;

1874: Virginia City and Deer Lodge;

1875: Fish Creek and Beaverhead Circuit;

1878: Sheridan and Bannack, Montana Conference;

1879: Sun River and Smith River Circuit;

1880: Missionary-at-large;

1884: Gallatin Valley and Missionary;

1885: Judith Basin Circuit and Missionary;

1886: Judith Basin;

1887: Fort Benton–Great Falls–Manitoba Railroad;

1888: Fort Benton and Great Falls;

1889; Crooke City;

1890: Presiding Elder: Great Falls District, Montana Mission;

1892: Superintendent, North Montana Mission;

1897: Presiding Elder, Helena District, Montana Conference;

1899: Superintendent, North Montana Mission;

1907: Superintendent, Great Falls District, North Montana Conference;

1913–1919: Superintendent, Milk River District, North Montana Conference.

He is credited with starting or building more than 100 churches and 50 parsonages, six hospitals and two schools.³³

Not long after arriving in Montana and while getting ready for a worship service, he was asked his name. When he told the audience, someone hollered back that the name was too long, so “we’ll just call you ‘Brother Van.’”³⁴

He held the first worship service in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, in 1873.

In the late summer of 1877, Van was involved in the Battle of Big Hole in southwestern Montana. The Nez Perce Indians did not want to be placed on a reservation in Oregon. They made a three-month “escape” across Idaho and Montana, clashing with the United States Army near Bannack, MT, in the battle of Big Hole. Van helped defend the town and was a scout for General Oliver Howard.³⁵

In the late 1870, while ministering in Dillon, MT, Van met Jennie Johnston, the 17-year-old daughter of an area rancher. They fell in love, but her parents wanted her to receive a college education first. Jennie was enrolled at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, but later contracted

³³Van Orsdel to Logan, *The North Montana Mission Minutes* (1910), 58; Whithorn, 166.

³⁴Lind, 52.

³⁵Lind, *From the Ground Up* (Polson, Mt.: Treasure State Publishing Co., 1961), 63–79.

tuberculosis, returned home and died in 1881, just before they were to marry. Van lost his only love and never thought of marrying again.³⁶

Van was elected to several General Conferences: 1876 and 1880, as a lay delegate from the Montana Conference; attended in 1892, 1896 and 1900; was elected a ministerial delegate from the Montana Conference in 1904, and then from the North Montana Conference in 1908, 1912, and 1916.

Montana Wesleyan College, the Methodist college he helped establish and partially fund during his lifetime, near Helena, Montana, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1911.³⁷

Living 47 years in Montana, Brother Van became known as “the best loved man in Montana.” Van helped take Montana’s 1873 Methodist Episcopal church membership from nearly 300 among “three and a half” churches to nearly 14,000 Methodists, 170 churches, 112 parsonages, and 222 Sunday schools with more than 24,000 children across both Montana conferences by the time of his death.³⁸ In 1891, he led a revival in Chinook, MT, that formed a class of 12. Van considered such results as “good”!

He served 29 years as either a district or a mission superintendent. His position took him all over northern and eastern Montana. He worked with wagon team drivers, cowboys, town citizens and the Blackfeet-Piegans Indians. He was adopted into the tribe in 1915 and was named “Great Heart.”³⁹ It was said that every dog who saw him coming would always “wag their tail.”⁴⁰

In October 1919, he was in Choteau, MT, for a meeting. That evening while visiting with friends, then later, trying to put his coat on to leave, his arm went limp. A stroke paralyzed him. Too ill, it was a month before Van was moved to Deaconess Hospital in Great Falls where he died on December 19. After two funerals, attended by a cross section of Montana’s citizens, one in Great Falls and the other in Helena, he was buried on December 23 in the Forestvale Cemetery near Helena.⁴¹

George Logan described Van’s preaching style: “He kept Hell out of his songs, prayers and exhortations. None of these had the smell of brimstone. He very seldom humored the devil by even mentioning his name. Yet he so interpreted the Bible as to believe in a personal devil as much as a personal God, and in a place called Hell as well as a place called Heaven. He preferred persuading men with the love of Christ rather than the fear of the devil.”⁴²

³⁶Lind, *Brother Van*, 121–147.

³⁷Whithorn, 166.

³⁸*Minutes of the Rocky Mountain Conference* (1873), statistical tables; *Minutes of the North Montana Conference and Montana Conference* (1920), statistical tables.

³⁹Lind, *Brother Van*, 169.

⁴⁰Lind, *Brother Van*, ix.

⁴¹Lind, *Brother Van*, 236–240.

⁴²George Logan, “Brother Van as I Knew and Understood Him” (manuscript) (Yellowstone Conference Archives, Rocky Mountain College, Billings, MT., no date), 12.

His latest biographer, Robert Lind, further described Van's preaching:

As he preached, his own interest in the subject grew, and the volume of his voice grew in accordance. He would stretch forth his arms in appeal until his stiffly-starched white cuffs would pop through his coat sleeves, forcing them nearly back to the elbow. Then with a violent gesture, he would bring his arms down, sometimes to slap his knees and his hands. His clear, pinkish complexion became ruddy as he poured energy into his sermons, and he paced from one side of the platform to the other, only occasionally stopping at the pulpit. Frequently he would fish around in his coattail and come forth with a large white handkerchief with which to wipe the tears that streamed down his face, or to unceremoniously blow his nose. At times, right in the middle of the great enthusiasm, he would break into a song, if a song came to mind that seemed best able to put across the point he was expounding. His sermons were usually not long, but he never failed to arouse people's enthusiasm.

III

Some comparisons can be made concerning these "Heavenly Twins." Both men were at the Battle of Gettysburg—Iliff, a Union Army participant; Van Orsdel as a civilian observer. Both men came west to spend their lives serving the Rocky Mountain region known as Montana and Utah. Both served in supervisory positions and their popularity would cause their election and/or attendance at General Conferences where as a team of preacher-singer they were welcomed enthusiastically. Both men in their early seventies died within two years of each other.

Several stories are told in Van's and Iliff's biographies concerning their relationship that would nickname them "The Heavenly Twins." Van and Iliff first met in 1873, and first worked together in February 1874 in Helena, Montana Territory. The attendance was large during the entire two-week revival, with 35 joining the church. Iliff would bring the sinners to the brink of brimstone fire, then Brother Van took over and would sing and pray the congregation back again.⁴³

Van and the Iliffs traveled in a buggy in 1875 to Salt Lake City for the Rocky Mountain Conference. When they arrived, the two ministers decided to explore Temple Square. Discovering the gates were closed and climbing the fence, the men walked down South Temple Street. In the distance they noticed Mormon President Brigham Young walking to his home. Meeting each other, the men shook hands and one minister announced they were from Montana attending a Methodist conference. Mr. Young replied with a smile, "I'm glad to meet you, I was once a Methodist myself."⁴⁴

Van and Iliff were "alike in many respects, while in other ways, the talents of the one complemented the other." With Van's singing and Iliff's

⁴³Van Orsdel to Logan, 58; "Brother Van is Dead From Paralytic Stroke," *Great Falls (MT) Daily Tribune* (Dec. 19, 1919), 12; Lind, *From the Ground Up*, 102.

⁴⁴Merkel, 67.

preaching, the combination guaranteed the toughest audience could be “brought to tears of repentance and hallelujahs of praise.”⁴⁵

Iloff and Van were well received wherever they preached and sang as a team either in church revivals or as delegates or attendees to General Conferences. For example, Van was a Rocky Mountain Conference lay delegate to the 1876 Methodist Episcopal General Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. Van was the Montana Conference’s lay delegate (he was ordained later that summer), Iloff was the Utah Conference ministerial delegate to the 1880 General Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio. Van attended the 1892 in Omaha, Nebraska, the 1896 in Cleveland, Ohio, and in Chicago, Illinois, the 1900 General Conference. He was the North Montana ministerial delegate to the 1904 Conference in Los Angeles,⁴⁶ the 1908 in Baltimore, the 1912 in Minneapolis, and the 1916 in Saratoga Springs, New York. Van and Iloff were in constant demand. Between Iloff’s preaching and Van’s singing, they worked the delegates into revival fever. “With their arms around each other’s shoulders the two old campaigners thrilled the throng (listed over three days at 800, 1,200 and 1,500) with their singing of such frontier favorites as ‘Over and Over’ and ‘The Gospel Team Is Coming.’”⁴⁷ Van stirred them “with song at any hour,” and “Iloff’s stentorian shout and perennial blaze of spiritual energy would have the perturbed host joining with him in fervent tears and hallelujahs.”⁴⁸

These two great Christian workers who helped plant Methodism in the West during the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century were quite a team. The world has not yet found another set of “Heavenly Twins” like William Van Orsdel and Thomas Iloff.

⁴⁵Lind, *From the Ground Up*, 101, 105.

⁴⁶Van Orsdel to Logan, 12.

⁴⁷Van Orsdel, “Diary” (May 1916), manuscript in Yellowstone Conference Archives, Rocky Mountain College, Billings, MT; Alson Smith, “Tom Iloff, Utah Saint,” *Classmate* (magazine), November 9, 1947, 4.

⁴⁸Gillilan, 55–56.