

HOW METHODISM CAME TO NORTH MONTANA

By Roberta B. West

The first Methodist to enter Montana was Jedediah Strong Smith, a layman, who went up the Missouri River and spent the winter of 1822-23 at the mouth of the Musselshell. In the spring of 1830 he was also at Yellowstone Bend and proceeded from there to the sources of the Musselshell and thence to its mouth, spending some time trapping in the Judith Basin.

People flocked to Montana with the discovery of gold on Grasshopper Creek (Bannack) in 1862, at Alder Gulch (Virginia City) in 1863, and at Last Chance Gulch (Helena) in 1864. The settlement of Montana and the beginning of religious work in the region really date from those gold strikes in the 1860's.

The first Methodist sermon in Montana of which there is record was delivered at Bannack by a preacher named Craig on January 10, 1864. During that same winter a group of Methodists in Virginia City organized themselves under the leadership of William Florkey for the purpose of holding prayer and class meetings. In June, 1864 a group of men, including an ordained local preacher named William James, built a church in Junction City some three miles from Virginia City. Preaching services and a Sunday school were held in the church. In that church Hugh Duncan preached his first sermon in Montana in July, 1864.

A Methodist church was built at Virginia City in the summer of 1864 at a cost of \$1,500. Half of the money was raised in thirty minutes on the day the church was dedicated, November 6, 1864. From that time forward many churches sought to collect large sums on the day they were dedicated. It was not unusual to schedule the Annual Conference in a church with a large debt so as to try to discharge the obligation by lifting a big offering and having the church dedicated while the bishop and the preachers were on hand. The records show that debts of \$8,000 and \$11,280 on two different churches were paid off in this manner.

Between 1864 and 1874, such preachers as Alderson, Comfort, Duncan, Hough, Iliff, Lathrop, McLaughlin, Riggin, Shippen, Stateler, Van Anda, and Van Orsdel labored for various periods in the southwest corner of Montana Territory. In those days Methodist work in the territories of the United States was administered as foreign missions.

The first Methodist sermon in North Montana was delivered on June 30, 1872 by William Wesley Van Orsdel at Fort Benton. At seven o'clock that morning he had stepped off the sternwheeler *Far West* which, in passing the *Nellie Peck*, had made a record-breaking

trip up the Missouri River. The early hour of arrival made it possible for "Brother Van," as he came to be affectionately known, to arrange for preaching services both in the afternoon and evening that day. The next Sunday Van Orsdel preached morning and evening at Sun River, as well as to the soldiers at Fort Shaw in the afternoon. On the Tuesday following, he conducted services with the Indians at the Blackfoot and Piegan Agency, a little west of what came to be Choteau. On his third Sunday in Montana, Van Orsdel preached in the evening at Helena where the presiding elder, J. A. Van Anda, resided.

At the outset Van Anda wisely allowed Van Orsdel to travel and preach at large, rather than assigning him to a definite circuit or station. Near the end of August, 1872, Van Orsdel went to Bozeman where the only Methodist church building in Montana at the time was located.¹ In January, 1873, Van Orsdel was delivering another sermon to the Piegan Indians when some members of the Flathead tribe slipped in and stole the Piegans' ponies. The service was immediately suspended, and Brother Van and B. W. Sanders allowed the Piegans to use their mounts for the chase. The ponies were soon recovered, all the Indians returned, and the religious service was resumed where it had left off. The next day the Indians escorted Van Orsdel on his first buffalo hunt, an incident made famous by Charles Russell's painting. Brother Van killed one of the animals, and that night he and the Indians feasted on buffalo meat in their camp.²

In February, 1873, at Prickly Pear Valley near Helena, Brother Van conducted his first protracted meeting in Montana. In late June of that year he journeyed to the newly established Yellowstone National Park and had the distinction of holding the first religious services there. On instructions from Van Anda, Van Orsdel went from Yellowstone Park to Sheridan, Montana, where he met Van Anda, T. C. Iliff, F. A. Riggin, and Hugh Duncan as they were returning by emigrant wagon from the Annual Conference at Salt Lake City.

Van Orsdel was appointed with Riggin to Beaverhead and Jefferson in 1873. By the time of the district meeting in Helena the following January each man had traveled 4,000 miles on horseback, and

¹ The Helena church had burned; the Virginia City church had been lost to Bishop Daniel S. Tuttle and the Episcopalians; and the Missoula church was in process of construction.

² Many years later (1918) Van Orsdel had an unpleasant experience in feasting with the Indians. He went to Redstone for a first quarterly conference, which happened to be the time for the Indian powwow at Poplar. Having long desired to attend one of the Indian gatherings, Van

Orsdel and the pastor, Reuben Dutton, went. At noon the Indians and the whites present formed in circles of about 100 each. Two Indians walked around the circles carrying kettles of meat, and each person in turn lifted out a piece for himself. As he bit into his helping of meat, Van Orsdel asked, "Buffalo or beef?" To his dismay the Indian replied, "Him fine fat dog! Fine fat dog!" Van Orsdel soon inconspicuously dropped his meat and stamped it into the ground.

together they reported nearly 100 conversions and accessions. Van Anda's report as presiding elder to the Rocky Conference at Salt Lake City in 1874 mentioned for the first time the establishment of Methodism at some northern points. He said, "Benton and Sunrise [Sun River] Circuit is a point visited only by myself."³ He meant that no other presiding elder had officially visited the region. Van Orsdel had preached there in 1872.

There were two Montana districts in 1875—Southeast and Northwest. The Southeast District was composed of Bozeman, Virginia City, and a little Indian work, while the Northwest District included the Helena Circuit, Missoula, Sun River, and Fort Benton. The last two places had no regular preaching. Such was the extent of Methodism in Montana in 1875.

In 1876, the Rocky Mountain Annual Conference, which included mainly Utah and Montana, met for the first time in Montana at Helena, and was divided into the Montana and the Utah Annual Conferences. Bishop William L. Harris, the first general superintendent of the Methodist Episcopal Church to visit Montana, made a rough 500-mile journey by stagecoach from Corinne, Utah, the nearest railroad point, to reach the seat of the conference. At the time there were no railroads in Montana Territory.

F. A. Riggin, the presiding elder of the Helena District, visited the Sun River area in 1876 and met with the Piegan Indians. Clark Wright, the pastor at Helena, held services in Chestnut Valley that year, and in 1877 the conference appointed him to Jefferson, Helena, and Sun River. This meant that Sun River was the first northern point to have an officially appointed pastor.

The 1877 Annual Conference appointed a committee to consider the possibility of establishing a school. Twelve years would pass before the cornerstone of an educational institution under Methodist auspices would be laid, but the formation of the committee showed that the minds of the early Methodists in Montana were bright with vision, and Rocky Mountain College at Billings stands as the fulfillment of their dreams.

Brother Van was assigned to Sun River and Smith River in 1879. This was the first resident appointment for North Montana. For Van Orsdel's support there was a missionary appropriation of \$325, the first missionary allotment for a Methodist preacher in the region. In November, 1879, Van Orsdel succeeded in organizing a class of five Methodists at Sun River.

The 1880 General Conference altered the status of the Montana Annual Conference and designated it as the Montana Mission.⁴ F. A. Riggin was appointed superintendent. The Mission became

³ Rocky Mountain Conference, 3rd session, August, 1874, pp. 15-17. Photocopy of printed Minutes from the Board of Missions.

⁴ See 1880 *General Conference Journal*, p. 369.

a full-fledged Annual Conference again in 1887. M. J. Hall, an evangelistic preacher and a good singer, was appointed to Sun River and Fort Benton. He served three years, the limit for Methodist pastorates in those days.

The 1882 Mission Conference established the *Montana Christian Advocate* with J. J. Garvin as editor. This conference organ, which continued until 1900, was always in financial difficulty and three years after its demise its debts were still troubling the conference. But the paper bound the Methodists together in spite of the immense Montana distances and it ministered to people in isolated frontier homes. One woman wrote, "The *Advocate* is all the food I have, except the dear Word of the Lord."⁵ The *Advocate* kept up the fight for temperance, promoted the Epworth League, supported the conference institutions, and kept other good causes before the people.

No one did more than Van Orsdel to keep the frontier churches and the struggling Montana Methodist institutions alive and solvent. He struggled with the problems of maintaining the church paper, the college, the hospital, and the children's home and school. (Facts about these institutions will be given below.) When others were ready to give up, he kept on. When the *Advocate* debt was heavy, he reasserted the value of the paper and proposed a plan to liquidate the obligation. When the conference adopted a motion to close the college, he led in getting it rescinded. For the small Methodist constituency in Montana to maintain a college, a hospital, and a children's home and school during the frontier days was all but impossible, and yet Brother Van through faith, prayer, persistence, and sacrifice somehow managed to convince the people that it could be done.

Jacob Mills was appointed to Fort Benton in 1882, and in 1883 his assignment also included Sun River. He led in building a parsonage at Benton the first year, and the next year he started a brick church at Sun River. These were the first Methodist buildings for church purposes in North Montana. Mills had lost an arm in the Civil War, and while near death in the hospital he dreamed that he had died and was on his way to heaven when he heard a voice saying, "Send him back! He has work to do!" He served as pastor, presiding elder, and conference evangelist in Montana Methodism, and made philanthropic gifts totaling \$170,000, forty per cent of the amount going to Montana Wesleyan College.

The 1884 list of appointments included two more points in the north—Judith Basin to be served by Mills and J. D. Phinney, and Flathead Lake to be supplied. Within two years Brother Van and Phinney had built a parsonage at Philbrook and a church at Lewis-

⁵ *Montana Christian Advocate*, January 17, 1895.

town in the Judith Basin. At the time there was no other church within a radius of 100 miles of Lewistown.

The *Minutes of the Montana Mission* presented statistics by charges for the first time in 1886. There were in North Montana that year 136 church members, including 37 on probation, two churches, two parsonages, and seven Sunday schools with 164 scholars. The Sunday schools were important for the spread of Methodism; they served as preaching points and the pupils were prospects for church membership.

In 1883 the five districts in Montana were reduced to two—Helena and Butte. In 1886 a third district, Bozeman, was created. It was by far the largest district, covering two-thirds of Montana. In establishing the Bozeman District Methodism recognized that it had both a responsibility and an opportunity in all of Montana. Up to that time Methodist work had been largely restricted to the small southwest corner of the Territory where the population was more dense.

The severe winter of 1886-87 broke the open-range cattle-raising business in Montana. Thousands of animals perished of cold and starvation in temperatures as low as minus 55 degree Fahrenheit.

The decade of the 1880's brought the railroads to Montana. The Utah and Northern came in from the south in 1881; the Northern Pacific appeared in 1881-83; and the first through train from St. Paul, Minnesota, over the Manitoba (Great Northern) and Montana Central reached Helena on November 21, 1887. The excitement created by the building of the Manitoba was shared by Van Orsdel and Riggin, who were stationed at Fort Benton at the time. Writing on September 30, 1887, they said:

It is the most marvelous affair in railroading we have ever witnessed. We were present as they laid the track by the city and at the driving of the silver spike on the 29th . . . Our circuit extends 400 miles east and north along the St. P[aul], M[inneapolis], and M[anitoba] through the newest part of Montana . . . From what we now see, Methodism has a great work to do in this region. Pray for us.⁶

While holding a revival at Highwood in January, 1888, Brother Van became critically ill and for a time was near death. Convalescence required two years. His poor health delayed at least a year the opening of Methodist work northeast of Fort Benton. The conference minutes for 1889 show that a brick church had been erected at Great Falls by Riggin and Van Orsdel "who have been very self-sacrificing in establishing the work in this field."⁷

In 1888, R. E. Smith was appointed agent for Montana Wesleyan University. Land was donated for the institution near Helena by Fred Gamer. The cornerstone of the building was laid on July 6,

⁶ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1887.

⁷ *Montana Conference Minutes*, 1889, p. 14.

1889. Smith's report on his fund raising efforts closed with a quotation from the song, "Harvest Time," by W. A. Spencer:

The tears of the sower and the songs of the reaper
Shall mingle together in joy by and by.⁸

Greatly loved and used by Brother Van, that song became famous in Montana Methodism.

The conference minutes for the three years 1887 to 1889, together with a report made by Jacob Mills in 1890, show awareness that Methodism was doing very little in North Montana. The General Board of Church Extension was also concerned about the matter. The result was the establishment of the Great Falls District in 1890. When Bishop John H. Vincent asked, "Whom shall I make presiding elder?" Mills replied, "Brother Van Orsdel." Thus was Brother Van launched upon a remarkable thirty-year career of administration in the church. In the story of his life and work one finds much of the record of how Methodism was brought to North Montana.

The newly created Great Falls District covered 60,000 square miles. It had six preachers, 204 church members including 16 probationers, five churches, three parsonages, and 11 Sunday schools with 328 scholars. In addition, there was a missionary appropriation of \$2,650 for the district.

The Annual Conference honored the new district by meeting at Great Falls in 1891. During the year a new church had been built at St. Clair by Job Little. Speaking of the achievement, Brother Van said, "How under God this work was carried on in the midst of the financial depression and the greatest drouth that Montana has ever known is wonderful!"⁹ Van Orsdel often employed the term "under God." As a boy he heard President Lincoln deliver the Gettysburg Address, and it is supposed that he was impressed with the use of the striking phrase in that memorable message.

The Great Northern Railroad pushed through the Flathead country in 1891 bringing settlers. Methodism had J. M. Eastland, a local preacher, there to greet them and to organize Sunday schools and classes for them.

At the 1892 General Conference in Omaha, Nebraska, F. A. Riggin, the delegate from Montana, led in getting the body to authorize the organization of the North Montana Mission. Comprised of the 60,000 square miles that had made up the Great Falls District, the Mission was organized August 9, 1892, at Anaconda, and Van Orsdel was appointed superintendent.

In 1894 the conference reports mentioned the 1893 depression when it was not even possible to cash missionary aid checks. The

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1891, p. 18.

reports also took note of the low price of silver and wool, and of the railroad strike which continued for 19 days near the time of the conference session. The appointments that year sent Riggin to Great Falls for the second time in his career. He and Van Orsdel had built the church there in 1888, and they were to be together again in the same city. As a matter of fact the two men were closely associated during most of their active ministry. They were born in the same year, received their first appointments in Montana together, were fellow workers on the same circuit in south Montana in the 1870's, were together in the Montana Mission in the 1880's with Riggin as superintendent and Van Orsdel as missionary at large, and were together at Fort Benton in 1887 to 1889 when the railroad came through. Beginning in 1894 they were to remain together in the North Montana Mission and then in the North Montana Conference, except for one year when Riggin was at Kalispell and two years when Brother Van was on the Helena District. Even after Riggin retired in 1912, Van Orsdel used him as a supply near his place of residence in Valley County. In 1921 at Kalispell, Riggin answered roll call at Annual Conference for the fiftieth year; he had served 49 years on the frontier, 29 of them as a presiding elder or superintendent. He attended the Annual Conference again in 1922 and passed away in 1924.

In 1895 there was a five-week revival at Chinook with Brother Van and J. A. Martin assisting the pastor. Among the converts was Augustus W. Hammer, a man who had ridden the range as a cowboy from Mexico to Canada for 24 years. He was said to be a typical cowboy with the language to prove it. His conversion created a sensation. "So interesting did the meetings become that some of the saloons closed up at the hours of service."¹⁰ Hammer took his commitment seriously; at once he began soliciting subscriptions among his friends to complete the bell tower on the Chinook church; soon afterward he entered Montana Wesleyan College, prepared for the ministry, was admitted into the conference on trial in 1899, married Alice Griffin in the same year, and together they served Montana Methodism acceptably for 31 years. He was known as an earnest Christian, a good gospel singer, and a self-sacrificing minister.

The 1895 reports and statistics showed four new churches—at the Piegan Indian Mission, Belt, Choteau, and at Willis in the Flathead country. The Choteau and Belt churches received gifts of \$250 each from the church at Montclair, New Jersey. The New Jersey congregation was interested in and contributed to the work in Montana for the next 24 years; every year the Epworth League in Montclair sent presents to each member of every frontier

¹⁰ *Montana State Conference Minutes*, 1930. Memoir to A. W. Hammer by Rev. J. A. Martin.

parsonage family. Van Orsdel visited the Montclair church on his trips east and helped to maintain the interest of the people in the Montana churches.

The Women's National Indian Association established a mission among the Blackfeet in 1893, with E. S. Dutcher in charge, and turned the work over to the Methodists. With the cooperation of the Indians, Dutcher built a parsonage and a chapel 24 by 46 feet.

In 1896, a young preacher named Alexis Berk was appointed to the Libby Circuit on the Flathead. While hunting deer in November of that year he became lost in a snowstorm and no trace of him, his clothing, or his rifle was ever found.

The Methodists opened their first hospital in Montana at Great Falls on June 16, 1898. At the outset F. A. Riggin wrote of it:

This promises to become a gracious avenue of applied Christianity. It is difficult to tell where it will lead in its ultimate outcome. I predict a wonderful career, and hundreds of the suffering of the earth will rise to call them blessed.¹¹

The outcome of the hospital venture was uncertain until 1902. In that year a woman named E. Augusta Ariss took charge and the institution began to grow. Today Montana Deaconess Hospital is a large, efficient institution. During the years six other Deaconess hospitals were established in the state and staffed with nurses many of whom received their training at Great Falls.

Every meeting of the Montana Mission expressed gratitude for the aid given by the Board of Missions, the Board of Church Extension, and the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the denomination. The latter organization was responsible for the "missionary barrel," a contribution which helped to clothe and equip the frontier parsonage families. More often than not the missionary barrel made it possible for the parsonage family to present a good appearance in public.

In 1899 Methodism inaugurated the Twentieth Century Thank Offering with the understanding that contributions could be spread over three years as the old century ended and the new one began. The appeal was for two million converts and \$20,000,000, the money to be used for the payment of church debts and the building of new churches, parsonages, colleges, and hospitals.

The 1900 *Minutes* reported the death of two ministers' wives, a youth of twenty-two, and a child of two in parsonage homes. Another minister's twenty-three-year old son died in 1901. Through the years many parsonage children were lost. Life in the new Northwest was hard. Bringing Methodism to Montana, north or south, meant not only privation and hard work but also the sacrifice of life.

¹¹ *North Montana Mission Minutes*, 1898, p. 10.

It is interesting to note in passing that Brother Van in closing his reports always gave credit to the pastors and the people, saying, "You, brethren of the ministry and laity, with your wives, are the victors. You have been instruments, under God, to bring about the results." With the aim of having the record show that some credit was due Brother Van, a motion was adopted in 1903 for the appointment of someone to write a supplement to the superintendent's report. J. R. Smith was designated, but apparently he did not carry out the assignment.

Bishop Charles C. McCabe, who had pointed Van Orsdel west in 1872, presided over the conferences in Montana in 1903. The two men had seen each other at the conference in Salt Lake City in 1875, at which time McCabe said to Van Orsdel, "Don't be discouraged; you are known all over heaven."¹² Van Orsdel attended the three Montana conferences—Kalispell Mission, organized in 1900, the North Montana Mission, and the Montana Conference—and enjoyed association with Bishop McCabe and his wife. Following the conference sessions, the three toured Yellowstone Park together, with Brother Van conducting campfire services of song and testimony. When McCabe died in 1907, Brother Van said, "We all have another strong and dear friend at the White Throne, with a crown ablaze with stars and his arms full of sheaves."¹³

Allan Rodger died June 5, 1904, the first active North Montana Methodist minister to fall at his post. He joined the Montana Conference in 1891. His death was the result of a blow in the abdomen by a rearing horse. Converted in his native Scotland under the preaching of Dwight L. Moody, Rodger was known for the quality of his spiritual life and as a builder of churches and parsonages.

The work on the Flathead made progress under R. M. Craven, the superintendent of the Kalispell Mission. Craven was a Confederate veteran. It is not now possible to locate all of the churches mentioned in the reports partly because there were several on a circuit.

In 1905, a church and parsonage were built at Whitefish, a new point on the Flathead. This building program was necessary because the Great Northern Railroad changed its division point from Kalispell to Whitefish in October, 1904, and the people, some 1,000 to 1,500 of them, moved with the railroad. Methodist work in Montana was frequently affected by migrations brought on by new discoveries of gold, the closing of old mines, the shift from steamboats and stagecoaches to travel by rail, and the relocation of railroad shops.

Also, in 1905, the *Montana Messenger* was established with E. L.

¹² *The Montana Messenger*, February 1, 1907.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Mills as editor. The paper reported and promoted Methodism for nearly 25 years.

Some Montana Methodist leaders were concerned about possible Roman Catholic competition when the Milk River and Sun River Irrigation Projects were proposed. F. A. Riggin said in 1905, "Our Romanist friends have instituted a colonization work . . . to induce families of their church to occupy these tracts. Methodists must also be alert." Within a few years a number of Roman Catholic and some Mennonite colonies were planted in the north land, but the Methodists seem not to have attempted colonization.

A newspaper account said that the people in a colony near Malta became concerned about Montana's winter weather when a self-appointed weather prophet predicted 100 degrees below zero for December 17, 1919. According to the story, every family in the colony dug a deep underground room, stocked it with provisions and fuel, and made a connecting passageway to a neighbor's dugout. The temperature did not fall to minus 100, but winter readings of minus 50 to 60 degrees are not uncommon in Montana. The record low was minus 69.7 degrees at Rogers Pass on January 20, 1954.¹⁴ During the terrible blizzards in the winter of 1906-07, fuel ran short, train service was disrupted several days, and where revivals were scheduled there were quips about the Methodists trying to save people from the infernal fires in weather 45 degrees below zero!

Brother Van's reports during these years showed that he held a service almost every day and that he traveled some 15,000 miles per year. He stressed personal piety and zeal for the spread of the gospel, saying:

We must ever keep the old landmarks plainly in view, and put great stress on secret prayer, family worship, prayer meetings, class meetings, and love feasts. Nothing will take the place of these important means of grace . . . We are in the beginning of things in this new northwest . . . We must now lay deep and well the foundation of the church and meet with the Gospel the coming multitudes . . . For this great task we need the Holy Ghost, money, and men, spiritual giants.¹⁵

The Kalispell and Montana Missions were merged in 1907 to form the North Montana Conference. At the time the Kalispell mission had 584 church members, 14 churches, 10 pastoral charges, 9 preachers, 6 parsonages, and 16 Sunday schools with 743 scholars. The North Montana Mission brought to the merger 1,191 church members, 30 churches, 25 charges, 23 preachers, 20 parsonages, and 37 Sunday schools with 1,943 scholars. The uniting conference met at Great Falls. During the session ground was broken for a \$50,000 addition to Montana Deaconess Hospital. Lucy Rider Meyer, head of the Chicago Training School for Deaconesses, turned the first

¹⁴ U. S. Weather Bureau.

¹⁵ *North Montana Mission Minutes*, 1906, pp. 19, 21.

spadeful of earth. Of the preachers who were active in Montana when the North Montana Mission was formed in 1892, six survived to witness the organization of the North Montana Conference—Van Orsdel, Craven, Eastland, Little, Logan, and Riggin. Brother Van and O. A. White were appointed presiding elders in 1907.

In 1909, due to failing health, George Logan became the first superannuate of the North Montana Conference. He had served for 20 years, and during 16 years of that time he was secretary of first the Mission and then the Conference. His first circuit in 1889 from Highwood to Glasgow was 254 miles in length. The conference also honored J. M. Eastland, who had labored 25 years. He served in the Flathead where he built at least five churches and one parsonage. A good singer, he usually heralded his approach to a place where he was to preach by making the timber ring with music before he came in sight of the church. Coupled with native ability, he had a definite religious experience and a winsome personality. He was said to be "the embodiment of spiritual sweetness."¹⁶

The Montana Deaconess School, which was for children under 14, opened in 1909 with Louise Stork as superintendent. It occupied the building in the Valley left vacant when Montana Wesleyan University moved to Helena.

Settlers came to Montana in large numbers in 1910. In the first six months some 10,000 filed for homesteading land at the United States Land Office in Great Falls, and 6,000 more filings were made in the northeastern part of the state.

Preparations were made for building a church at Pine Grove some forty miles south of Lewistown. The church was in the vicinity of the former headquarters of a roving band of horse thieves, some of whom were hanged by the Vigilantes. Brother Van said, "Near this site we will build a house of prayer."¹⁷ J. A. Martin, pastor at Great Falls, completed a \$6,000-parsonage, furnishing one of the best rooms in the house for Brother Van. Philo W. Haynes was appointed Sunday school missionary and continued in the office until 1923. Largely as a result of his leadership, the conference showed a gain of 24 Sunday schools and 1,035 scholars in 1911.

The Annual Conference met at Fort Benton in 1912 and celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Van Orsdel's arrival there in 1872. Charles M. Donaldson, the Fort Benton pastor, proposed a pioneer banquet at which Brother Van would be honored. Van Orsdel countered with the suggestion that all preachers who had served Montana Methodism twenty years or more be felicitated at the banquet. Accordingly seven men—Van Orsdel, Craven, Little, Logan, Martin, Mills, and Riggin—were the guests of honor at a large banquet in the Grand Union Hotel, August 16, 1912. One

¹⁶ *North Montana Conference Minutes*, 1918, p. 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1910, p. 36.

feature of the banquet was the awarding of watch charms to the veterans. On one side of the charm were the words, "Order of Caleb, Num. 13:30"; on the other side was a cross set with jewels. At the dinner Bishop Naphtali Luccock, who had suggested forming the Order of Caleb, awarded the watch charms and formally instituted the Order in Montana Methodism. The next year a constitution and by-laws was adopted which provided that preachers who had served as much as twenty years in Montana were eligible for membership in the Order. Since the institution of the Order, the Caleb banquet has been one of the highlights of the Annual Conference sessions. In more recent years each new member of the Order has received a large pocketknife which he surrenders after one year to another veteran who is just being initiated into the Order. The knife is considered symbolic of the instrument with which the spies cut down the cluster of grapes at the Brook Eschol in Canaan. The Order of Caleb is regarded as a fitting memorial to Van Orsdel, because it lives in people. A Van Orsdel Memorial Hall in the valley near Helena was damaged by the 1935 earthquake and is already decaying.

Job Little and F. A. Riggin retired in 1912. Little, who had served 27 years as a pastor in Montana, was born in London in 1847 and received part of his education in Charles H. Spurgeon's night school. Coming to America in 1871, he studied in Brooklyn, New York, in a night school established by DeWitt Talmadge. After 14 years in Brooklyn, he went in 1885 to the Sun River country in Montana, and except for five years in Butte churches, he lived in that region as a pastor and as a superannuate until his death in 1930. He was known as a quiet, beloved, and self-sacrificing pastor on the frontier.

The 1913 conference statistics showed a gain of 1,000 church members and 1,115 in Sunday school enrollment, the largest increase for any one year in North Montana history. The advance was due in part to the arrival of many new settlers, particularly in the northeastern part of the state. Because of the growing population in the northeast, the conference created the Milk River District and appointed Van Orsdel, the veteran at developing work on new frontiers, as the superintendent.

J. A. Martin, who had been pastor at Great Falls five years, succeeded Van Orsdel on the Great Falls District. Martin was born in Ontario in 1869 and came to Montana in 1892, serving as a pastor for the next 21 years. He was appointed as superintendent of the Great Falls District for ten successive years, a record in Montana. In that decade he traveled the district by boat, train, buggy, wagon, sleigh, automobile, and on foot for a total of 249,714 miles, which may have been a record for his day in American Methodism. In his 1916 report to the conference, Martin said he had become "quite proficient in operating all kinds of gates, especially the Montana ones, where the

barbs catch you both going and coming." The gates were just one of the difficulties the preachers encountered in bringing Methodism to Montana. After his tour of duty on the Great Falls District, Martin served seven years as field representative and 15 years as purchasing agent for Montana Deaconess Hospital. During his 22 years at the hospital he traveled, preached, and ministered to the patients, while at the same time giving attention to the mundane affairs of the institution. He died in 1945.

The weather and the crops affected the work of Methodism in Montana. In his 1916 report to the conference Brother Van mentioned the "unprecedented severity" of the preceding winter. The temperature dropped to minus 57 at Havre and minus 68 at Saco. That year the wheat yield was 60 bushels to the acre, but the very next year was one of "unprecedented drouth."

Van Orsdel's brethren elected him a delegate to General Conference six times. At the 1916 General Conference, Saratoga Springs, New York, he and his friend, Thomas C. Iliff, conducted love feasts each Sunday at nine o'clock. Both attracted favorable attention among the delegates because of their fervent singing. As a member of the General Conference from 1908 to 1916, Brother Van stood for the retention in the Discipline of the paragraph against worldly amusements. No change was made regarding that paragraph until 1920, and by that time Brother Van had gone to his reward.

In reporting on the work among the Indians in 1917 Van Orsdel said, "The vision that the writer had of these Indians and others, including the few white settlers who were in the new territory of Montana, 46 years ago, had very much to do with his coming, and remaining, in the new West."¹⁸ A. W. Hammer was then superintendent of the Piegan Mission. Others who served the work from its beginning in 1893 were E. S. Dutcher, 1893-1899, and F. A. Riggin, 1899-1912. On Riggin's retirement at the conference session in August, 1912, the work was left unmanned until January, 1913. This proved to be a calamity for the mission. Church services and activities ceased, some 48 window panes were broken, and the snow was three feet deep on the floor of the church when Hammer arrived. Hammer moved the church to Browning and reorganized the congregation. He served the mission until 1921 when Henry Mecklenburg took charge.

Thomas C. Iliff served as presiding elder of the Salt Lake District in the Rocky Mountain Conference in the 1870's. He was secretary of the Board of Home Missions and Church Extension of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1901-1909, and afterward was secretary of church extension in the Colorado Conference, and "General Dedicator of Churches Throughout the Nation." Iliff and Van Orsdel

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1917, p. 53.

were close friends through the years. In December, 1918, following Iliff's death on February 22 of that year, Van Orsdel sent out hundreds of Christmas cards bearing a picture of Iliff and himself at the 1916 General Conference.

The great Centenary movement was of interest and importance in Montana Methodism for five years. Van Orsdel and Martin attended the gathering of bishops and district superintendents at Columbus, Ohio, June 18-20, 1918, where the campaign was initiated. The plan was to enlist one million persons who would pray, enroll one million tithers, win one million converts, reclaim one million lost Methodists, strive for 53,000 life commitments, and raise \$80,000,000, with half of it to be used for home missions and the other half for foreign missions. A great convention was held in Columbus, June 20 to July 7, 1919, to celebrate the centennial of the organization of the Methodist Missionary Society, project plans for future missions, and perfect the procedures for the great Centenary financial campaign. The financial pledges and the goals were to be consummated over a period of five years. The great endeavor would be called "Centenary" until 1924, and thereafter it was to be a continuing program known as "World Service."

George Mecklenburg served as secretary for the Centenary in the Helena Area for three and one-half years, and then Charles Bovard was given the assignment. The canvass for financial pledges began on Sunday, April 27, 1919, and closed on Sunday, May 4. Brother Van worked hard in preparation for and during the campaign. Saco, a charge on his district, was the first in the Helena Area to subscribe its financial quota. His Milk River District was the first to reach its goal in pledges in the area. His North Montana Conference was the first in the area to report a full quota of pledges, and the Helena Area was the first in the nation to go "over the top."¹⁹ In view of the victory for the Centenary in Montana, it seemed appropriate that William Wesley Van Orsdel should lead on horseback the great parade held in Columbus July 4, 1919,²⁰ when some 10,000 Methodists from 38 countries marched in review before 120,000 spectators.²¹ The honor accorded Van Orsdel on that occasion seemed fitting also because of his 47 years of service to Methodism on the frontier in Montana. He seemed to realize that the event was the climax of his long career in the Methodist ministry, remarking after the parade, "There doesn't seem to be much left for me to do but to say, 'Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.'"²²

Van Orsdel returned to Montana, attended his Annual Conference

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1919, p. 47, and *The Montana Messenger*, June 1, 1919, pp. 2, 5.

²⁰ *The Messenger*, August 1, 1919, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Pacific Christian Advocate*, January 28, 1920.

beginning August 13, 1919, was elected a reserve delegate to the 1920 General Conference, was appointed to the Milk River District for his seventh year, and set about doing his part to help the denomination win one million converts before General Conference. Following the Annual Conference he toured the pastoral charges in the northeastern part of his district. On October 9 he was scheduled to attend a reception in the Chinook church to celebrate his own appointment to the district for seven years and that of J. A. Hill as pastor of the Chinook church for twelve years. The reception was never held. On the preceding day Brother Van was paralyzed by a stroke. He lingered for two months and passed away December 19, 1919, at the age of 71. Flags flew at half mast and there was mourning all over Montana. Burial was in Helena. In accordance with a wish he expressed before he died, Christmas cards were sent to his friends that year bearing his picture and the inscription, "First Christmas in Heaven!" A. W. Hammer, whose life and language had been so wonderfully changed under the ministry of Van Orsdel and Martin, as indicated above, penned the appropriate eulogy, entitling it, "Brother Van, the Trail Blazer":

How few of us today that pay tribute to the fallen leader really know or comprehend what this pioneer met and overcame. If we could just see Fort Benton as he saw it that July of 47 years ago, with its medley of freighters, prospectors, fur traders, Indians, breeds, gamblers, and outcasts, without law or order except as sustained by the six-shooter and the Winchester. Not a promising population to build into the kingdom of God.

There were no trails there to follow. He must make them. No official board to greet and welcome the boy from Gettysburg. Yet out of these mule skinnners, bullwhackers, prospectors, traders, gamblers, and outcasts, and the widely scattered homes of this great state, with a faith that overlooked obstacles higher than the Rocky Mountains, he sang, prayed, and shouted his way to victory and built the kingdom of heaven in this land of the Shining Mountains. There were no trails that led to the hearts of this mass, no order of service that could ever fit this medley of humanity, but he made a way into the lives and affections of this people, and left trails for others to follow.

Sometimes we hear a preacher tell of hardships, how he had gone to a schoolhouse and built his own fire, swept out the room after the last dance, furnished the lights, and had a half dozen to service. But this man had no schoolhouses. The freighters' or cowboys' camp, the cabin or the ranch home, the Indian tepee, the barroom, or the street, made him a pulpit. And whatever might be the congregations he always gave them his best in words and song.

He saw the watering places of the buffalo and the antelope become the campground of the cowboy and the shepherd. These oftentimes gave way to the ranches and towns. He saw wide places in the trails become cities. He saw the buffalo and the antelope give way to the cattle and sheep; these in turn gave way to the farmer. He saw the great prairies turned into golden wheat fields. And to meet these changes there were no trails, but he made them and showed us how to follow them.

A two-days' drive in a buggy over unmarked prairies, with half a dozen out to hear, was victory if some backslider came home to God. What a joy it was for him to tell of his Lord.

He found no trails when he came, but he left Montana covered with them, not only literally, but also spiritual ones into the lives and hearts of men, women, and children all over this great state. How he loved the children! I think that when those children from the school sang at the grave he asked

those about him in heaven to be quiet so he could hear their voices.

A poor Indian said to the writer the next day after Great Heart had left us, "Brother Van is gone, is he?" "Yes," was the reply, "Brother Van is in heaven." His reply was, "Indian has a friend in heaven, then."

Our brother had a saying of a good deed or of a soul coming to Christ, "This is known all over heaven." The friend of all, the Trail Blazer, is not among strangers, for literally he is known all over heaven.

He is gone; he has left the trails; and in the words of another pioneer, "Let us camp on these trails."²³

In retrospect Van Orsdel's friends were glad that his demise came soon after his triumphs in connection with the launching of the Centenary campaign, for he was thereby spared frustration and great disappointment. Calamities and reverses soon heaped upon Montana, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the nation. The drouth continued seven years in Montana, the great economic depression came (it began in Montana long before the 1929 stock market crash in New York), Montana agriculture was hurt by grasshoppers, cutworms, storms, and hail which forced settlers to leave, and the work of the church lagged. As the end of the five-year Centenary campaign drew near the North Montana Conference had paid only 45 per cent of its pledges.

At the outset of the Centenary campaign, Van Orsdel had said, "Under God it must be done, and it will be the salvation of the church."²⁴ As it turned out it was of great help to Methodism in the North Montana Conference. Without the Centenary funds which were poured into North Montana, it is doubtful that Methodism there could have weathered the long period of economic hardship. J. H. Durand, who succeeded Brother Van on the district, said of the Centenary, "Had it not been for this assistance, many of our charges could not have been maintained this year. What a grand thing it is to belong to a great church whose arms of love encircle the whole world."²⁵ In 1922, J. A. Martin declared, "Many of our churches would have been closed last year had it not been for the Centenary . . . Truly, it is the greatest thing that ever happened in Methodism."²⁶

In 1920, Glacier Park District was formed by adding the Flathead country to the Milk River District, while Fort Benton was again placed on the Great Falls District. Charles G. Cole replaced Durand as district superintendent in 1921. In his 1922 report to the Annual Conference, Cole said, "Because of hard times, there has been very little new work begun during the last five years."²⁷ But there were advances in some areas. Montana Deaconess Hospital won recognition for outstanding work in its orthopedic department. In 1923 the

²³ *The Messenger*, January 15, 1920.

²⁴ *The Messenger*, January 15, 1920.

²⁵ *North Montana Conference Minutes*, 1920, p. 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁷ *North Montana Conference Minutes*, 1922, p. 30.

college merged with the Presbyterian school in Montana, the new institution taking the name of Intermountain Union College which then received support from both denominations. A summer ministry in the hotels and camps of Glacier Park was started by Henry Mecklenburg. Epworth League Institutes were initiated under the direction of Cecil L. Clifford. Edwin Dover, an excellent youth leader, was admitted into the Annual Conference on trial. Thus in spite of prolonged douth, hard winters, crop failures, bank closings, and economic depression generally, the church did not fail. Indeed, it persevered and made progress.

The North Montana Annual Conference as such ended in 1924. On August 27 of that year it was merged with the Montana Annual Conference to form the Montana State Annual Conference. At unification in 1939 the name of the organization was altered slightly. Since that time it has been the Montana Annual Conference of The Methodist Church.