

ITINERANT CIRCUIT-RIDING MINISTER: WARRIOR OF LIGHT IN A WILDERNESS OF CHAOS

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When, Mr. President, a complete catalogue of the nation's builders shall be made, truth, justice, and gratitude unite to demand that high up in the list shall be placed the Methodist circuit rider....What a mighty man was he!...[T]his man, the Methodist circuit rider, stands the peer of any man, or set of men, who helped to build the republic....Americans are as free as they are because the Methodist circuit rider preached Americanism. (Fraternal Address, John C. Kilgo, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1904 General Conference).¹

Circuit riders, "bold emissaries of the cross,"² held a hallowed place in Methodist history and mythology. Missionary work was the hall mark of early Methodism and its first institutionalized form were the circuit riders or itinerant preachers. They were the new St. Pauls in the Methodist pantheon.³ Through the circuit riders, Methodists were one with the dawn of Methodist work. Consider Holston, Tennessee, circuit historian Dr. W. G. E. Cunyningham's observations:

No ecclesiastical "red-tape" interfered with the labors of these earnest-minded Christian men. The word of the Lord had "free course," and was "glorified." As in the apostolic age of Christianity the scattered believers "went everywhere preaching the word," and as in Samaria "the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake," so in the early days of Methodism in this country the gospel was carried into wilderness by the enthusiastic Methodist pioneer, and it was gladly received by the multitudes.⁴

No greater praise for these stalwart disseminators of the good news was possible.

This form of communication followed the example of founder John Wesley, a tireless itinerant who found itinerant preaching an effective tool supporting the revival in England.⁵ He spread the good news in person in

¹ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1904* (New York: Eaton and Mains), 566, 564.

² Daniel Dorchester, *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement Down to the Present Time* (New York: Hunt and Eaton, 1890), 389.

³ *The Methodist Centennial Year-Book for 1884: The One Hundredth Year of the Separate Organization of American Methodism* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1883), 16.

⁴ Quoted in R. N. Price, *Holston Methodism: From Its Origin to the Present Time, Vol. I: From the Introduction of Methodism into Holston County to the Year 1804* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1903), 89.

⁵ Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), 112.

Georgia, England, Scotland (20 times), Wales (24 times), Ireland (21 times), and Cornwall (31 times). This 18th-century St. Paul is estimated to have traveled 250,000 miles and preached over 40,000 times during the 1700s in a new global arena, far surpassing the Roman world the 1st-century saint had known.⁶

Since Wesley himself could not be everywhere at all times, this organizational opportunist went with the flow of historical circumstances. The very societies he had created outside the Anglican ecclesiastical structure, even if he planned his meetings not to overlap parish services, needed instructors in his absence since the parish clergy excluded them from the communion table.⁷ The resulting structure proved crucial to the success of the nascent religion.⁸ These annually-appointed itinerants by Wesley served as his personal representatives among the Societies thereby helping him to maintain control over them.⁹ By so doing the genius of organization hit upon a structure that maximized his personal control without the bureaucratic structure of the Anglican Church or local independence of the Puritans.¹⁰

In some ways, after 1740, these itinerants may be viewed as an invading army violating the home or parish of the established Anglican Church. The church frequently did react in this manner to this challenge to public order and authority by seeking to prevent the itinerants from preaching on its turf by whatever means it could. As tensions continued to mount, former Holy Club member John Hervey voiced the widespread criticism of this invasion of other men's parishes.¹¹ In Wesley's reply, one may observe a fundamental principle of the budding religion. Whereas Luther enabled the individual to read the Bible independent of the established church, Wesley enabled people to preach the gospel independent of the established church,

God in Scripture commands me, according to my power to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's

⁶ Maldwyn Edwards, "Wesley, John," *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 2497; John Pearce, ed., *The Wesleys in Cornwall: Extracts from the Journals of John and Charles Wesley and John Nelson* (Truro, Cornwall: Bradford Barton Ltd., 1969).

⁷ Abel Stevens, *History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1900), I:38.

⁸ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 81.

⁹ See John Swanson, "Our Discipline," in *History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, Vol. I: The People Called Methodists* (London: Epworth Press, 1965), 198, who cites eight sources.

¹⁰ See Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 9: The Methodist Societies* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 19-21; Henry D. Rack, "Religious Societies and the Origins of Methodism," in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 1938, 38:582-595 (590).

¹¹ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 63-69; Richard Cameron, *The Rise of Methodism: A Source Book* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 227; John Turner, *John Wesley: The Evangelical Revival and the Rise of Methodism in England* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), 35-36.

parish....Whom then shall I hear, God or man?... I look upon *all the world as my parish*.”¹²

In Wesley’s mind, he was living a life from the time of primitive Christianity, a popular concept in England since the 1670s. He was living the apostolic life which he saw as essential for the revival of the church.¹³

That apostolic vision was brought to America by Francis Asbury, the first elected Bishop or Superintendent of the independent Methodist Episcopal Church in the newly-formed country. In his Valedictory Address of August 5, 1813, Asbury himself spoke about the primitive age of the church and of “great itinerant evangelists.” He compared the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to the grand council in Jerusalem hosted by James and attended by Paul.¹⁴ Itinerant Asbury traveled so much throughout the country that he instructed one correspondent in England to address mail to him simply as “Francis Asbury, In America.”¹⁵

These circuit riders in America were warriors of light amidst the wilderness darkness. Horace Bushnell called them “a kind of light artillery that God had organized, to pursue and overtake the fugitives that flee into the wilderness from his presence.”¹⁶ “[T]hey were not of the earth ... their citizenship was in heaven.”¹⁷ They were the ones who “brought order out of this chaos.”¹⁸ Famed 19th-century itinerant James Finley waxed eloquent when describing the success of the Methodist warrior of light bringing order to chaos.¹⁹ He envisioned the “godlike journey” of the intrepid preacher as a cosmic mission which heralded the dawning of a new day in human history.²⁰ The 1832 General Conference Committee on Itinerancy similarly proclaimed these warriors as saving humans from their wretchedness and res-

¹² A letter of John Wesley dated to March 20, 1739, quoted in Baker 63.

¹³ Rack, 588-590.

¹⁴ Elmer T. Clark, Editor in Chief, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* (London: The Epworth Press), 3:484- 486).

¹⁵ Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 29.

¹⁶ Horace Bushnell, *Barbarism the First Danger*, 1847, quoted in Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 223.

¹⁷ Isaac Patton Martin, *Methodism in Holston* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, The Methodist Historical Society Holston Conference, 1945), 14.

¹⁸ Edward Eggleston, *The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), vi. Methodist heroes create order out of chaos: see William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840, Vol. IV: The Methodists* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 3; and Charles A. Johnson, “The Frontier Camp Meeting: Contemporary and Historical Appraisals, 1805-1840,” *The Mississippi Historical Review*, 1950, 37:91-110 [94]).

¹⁹ See James B. Finley, *Sketches of Western Methodism: Biographical, Historical, and Miscellaneous, Illustrative of Pioneer Life* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1857), 17.

²⁰ Finley, 17.

cuing them from their “abodes of misery” by subduing the world to “the cross of Christ.”²¹

These were the “mighty warriors of olden time” whose “victories achieved by the cross” remained unwritten, but not forgotten.²² In writing his history, Finley sought to connect his audience to its origins while “the waves of oblivion were rapidly washing out the few traces that remained” of these heroes of only decades earlier.²³ As Gallaher noted about the itinerants when reviewing a century of Methodism in Iowa in 1944, their record was written on “the hearts of those who heard the message” and not in newspapers,²⁴ a sentiment echoed one year later in Martin’s history on Methodism in Holston.²⁵ Historians, however, do want to write the stories of these wandering wayfarers of Lord so they may be understood in other times and contexts.

Q. Who in a position of authority was there to communicate this message of assurance amidst the surrounding uncertainty?

A. The Methodist itinerant preacher ever ready to convert the wilderness wanderer.

The willingness of the Methodist itinerant to convert the American was not always reciprocated by the Revolutionary American. Initially, any American Methodist itinerants in the 1770s bore the added brunt of Wesley’s Loyalist position. They were alone, exposed in the wilderness, and perceived as a threat to the fledgling republic.²⁶ Abel Stevens, prominent during the Methodist centennial era, was in awe of the adversities these stalwart pioneers had overcome only mere decades ago.²⁷ Their independence and the lack of formal structure also allowed these intrepid individuals to establish their own identity independent of English direction. With the ending of the War of Independence and the creation of an American Methodist Church, the itinerants were better able to deliver their message in the new country.

The itinerant schema provided a cost-effective basis of reaching a greater number of people than resident clergy could obtain in the sparsely populated American wilderness of small isolated settlements. They were “a highly mobile ministry of traveling preachers who covered a vast territory

²¹ *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. 1 1796-1836* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 324-325.

²² Finley, 17-18.

²³ Finley, 4, 21.

²⁴ Ruth A. Gallaher, *A Century of Methodism in Iowa, 1844-1944* (Mount Vernon, IA: Inter-Conference Commission on the Iowa Centennial of Methodism, 1944), 8.

²⁵ Martin, 20.

²⁶ Dee A. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 56-58.

²⁷ Stevens, II:175.

rather than being rooted in a single locality.”²⁸ Circuits could be extended with amazing rapidity into the newly settled areas of the American West which led to a standard storytelling motif. For example, a Bishop seeking places to preach in his area came upon an isolated farmhouse, commented:

“I suppose you never had preaching in this place, so far distant from settlements?”

The farmer quickly replied:

“Oh! yes, my house is a regular preaching place for the itinerant Methodists. They preach and hold class here every three weeks.”

And the Bishop despaired of his mission:

“I give it up. These Methodists are everywhere.”²⁹

Similar stories were told elsewhere.³⁰ The proverbial saying, “There is nothing out today but crows and Methodist preachers,”³¹ expressed the public perception of these circuit riders.

The circuit system provided Methodists with a leg up on their fixed-asset Protestant rivals on reaching remote areas in the burgeoning young Republic.³² Peter Cartwright, one of Methodism’s most colorful circuit riders boasted of its superiority in conquering the wilderness over the efforts of other religions.³³ One Presbyterian who toured the west for the Massachusetts Missionary Society and the Missionary Society of Connecticut in 1812 grudgingly admitted that the Methodist system “is by far the ablest for domestic missionary effort ever yet adopted.”³⁴ In 1818, Baptist minister John Mason Peck called it “the most economical and successful mode of supplying the destitute, and strengthening and building up feeble churches, that has been tried” and likened it to the time of the apostles.³⁵ In 1841 President Harrison addressed a committee appointed to investigate the spiritual destitution in the West and noted that the stranger one met on the road was likely to be a Methodist preacher.³⁶ These thoughts were

²⁸ Winthrop Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 122.

²⁹ Stephen Norris Fellows, *History of the Upper Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1856-1906* (Cedar Rapids: Laurance Press, 1907), 38.

³⁰ See Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 57; Charles A. Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting: Religion’s Harvest Time*, Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955), 19; and Richard Cameron, *Methodism and Society*, Vol. I 111.

³¹ W. M. Gewehr, “Some Factors in the Expansion of Frontier Methodism, 1800-1811,” *Journal of Religion* 1928, 8:98- 120 (103).

³² Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 20, 40, 53; Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 436; Hudson, 122, 147.

³³ Quoted in Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, 57.

³⁴ John F. Schermerhorn and Samuel J. Mills, *A Correct View of that Part of the United States Which Lies West of the Allegheny Mountains, with Regard to Religion and Morals* (Hartford, 1814), 41.

³⁵ From *Memoir of John Mason Peck D.D.*, originally published 1864 and reprinted in 1965, 124, quoted in Noll, 170.

³⁶ Fellows, 229.

echoed by Teddy Roosevelt as cited by the Upper Iowa Conference on its 50th anniversary in 1906, "The pioneer preacher did more than all other forces combined to shape the character and create the standards of growing western civilization."³⁷

The circuit riders tended to be lay preachers often of minimal formal education.³⁸ They looked for their reward not in the fields to be ploughed but in the souls to be won. They would receive their just reward in heaven above so the benefits of academic learning had little appeal to them.³⁹ Theological education was thought to contribute to the lessening of evangelistic zeal and the neglect of personal piety.⁴⁰ There was only a limited amount of time in the life of each rider of the Lord and it could be better spent reaching out to those who needed to be saved and sustaining those who had been saved rather than frittering it away in studying theology.

Wesley had made this point from the start. Even though he had attended college, he declared that such an education was not necessary insofar as understanding Scripture was concerned. A believing uneducated itinerant was more knowledgeable about the meaning of a text than an unfaithful and educated parish priest.⁴¹ In his Valedictory Address, Asbury expressed himself forcefully on the same subject.⁴²

The lack of formal education contributed to their unjustly becoming the "whipping boy of many writers on frontier history ... as illiterate, untrained, and undisciplined."⁴³ Circuit riders were no match for their clerical counterparts in other denominations in a formal debate on theology, but dry doctrine was not the message they delivered or that their audiences sought.⁴⁴ These "Brush college" graduates spoke the language of the frontier, not the language of the eastern college elite.⁴⁵ They spoke the language of temperance

³⁷ Fellows, 229, 259-260.

³⁸ J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the United Brethren Church*, ed. Kenneth W. Krueger (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 193-194; Johnson, "The Frontier Camp Meeting, 103.

³⁹ John T. Cunningham, *University in the Forest: The Story of Drew University*, no city: Afton Publishing Co., 1990), 16.

⁴⁰ Gerald O. McCulloh, *Ministerial Education in the American Methodist Movement* (Nashville: United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1980), 21.

⁴¹ "A Letter to the Rev. Dr. Rutherford," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984-, 9:378-379.

⁴² *JLFA* 3:481.

⁴³ Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, 145, 151. The uneducated image of the itinerant was the subject of discussion in the General Conferences in 1816, 1820, and 1844 (see *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. I: 1796-1836* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1855), 149, 151, 183, 186; and *Journals of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Vol. II: 1840-1844* (New York: Carlton and Phillips, 1856), 140-143.

⁴⁴ Wigger, 48-49.

⁴⁵ Circuit-rider Alfred Bunson referred to his mentor Shadrach Bostwick of Ohio's Western Reserve as "a father to me, ...a professor and teacher in our 'Brush College'" (Alfred Bunson, *A Western Pioneer*, 1857, I:235, quoted in Frederick A. Norwood, "The Shaping of Methodist Ministry," *Religion in Life*, 1974, 43:337-351 [338].

and anti-slavery and sang the hymns the people longed to hear and sing.⁴⁶ They rehearsed the Gospels with theatrical flourish before an audience who became one with the performer and were not passive observers or readers.⁴⁷ Their expertise was in the “plain meaning of the Bible” and in their ability readily to apply it to the needs of their back country wilderness audience.⁴⁸ “His sermons gave the devil a rough and tumble fight, the shouts of victory from saved multitudes was the sign that the sermons were from heaven.”⁴⁹ The singing of “Amazing Grace” was more powerful than the prepared sermons read by the educated preachers of the learned religions.⁵⁰

Another factor contributing to the success of the circuit system was the circuit itself. These young preachers did not need to prepare as many new sermons as a settled preacher did. On large circuits, they constantly preached at different localities and could use the same sermon again and again.⁵¹ Indeed the system of preaching stations, effectively organized, staffed, and supervised, provided the infrastructure for the expansion and success of the circuit system.⁵² The *Methodist Review* described the daily life of these preachers as a counterpart to that of the legendary western cowboy who rode not the range, but the circuit and with the Bible not the branding iron.⁵³ The saddlebag notebook contained sermon notes, circuit plan, journals [it was a journal-keeping religion], and account ledger of book sales for these sales agents of the Methodist Book Concern.⁵⁴

There was a physical dimension to their presence. Riding the circuit demanded physically fit men who could endure the constant physical challenges of the job.⁵⁵ A commentator on Methodist folklore tactfully wrote, the “first circuit of a young itinerant frequently tested his spirit by challenging his ability to survive physically. ... Those who weathered “Brush College’s” elementary survival training graduated to more severe spiritual tests, such as ridicule or untimely advice.”⁵⁶ On a positive note, Leon H. Vincent, nephew of itinerant John Heyl Vincent of Chautauqua and the Uniform Sunday School Lessons, described the riders as “forceful, democratic good talkers and endowed with plenty of mother wit” who were as eager to be on the road

⁴⁶ See Gallaher, 7.

⁴⁷ On not being separate from the people, see Dale Johnson, “The Methodist Quest for an Educated Ministry,” *Church History* 1982, 51:304-320 [307].

⁴⁸ Fellows, 45.

⁴⁹ Thomas Fleming, “A Tribute to the Pioneer Preacher” in Fellows, 251.

⁵⁰ Fleming, in Fellows, 254.

⁵¹ William Warren Sweet, *Methodism in American History*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961, 2nd ed.), 146.

⁵² Ahlstrom, 437.

⁵³ Book Review of *The House of Harper* by J. Henry Harper, *Methodist Review* 1912/5:492-498 (494).

⁵⁴ Andrews, 209; Finley, 51; Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, 161, 167; Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier*, v.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, 154.

⁵⁶ Donald E. Byrne, Jr., *No Foot of Land: Folklore of American Methodist Itinerants* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1975), 182.

as a boy.⁵⁷ J. Franklin Jameson, president of the American Historical Society, characterized them in 1908 as “[s]tout-hearted, downright, muscular, practical [men].”⁵⁸ Former circuit rider, Sunday School activist, and novelist Eggleston’s 1878 fictional hero was a “muscular young preacher” whose love life became “a common topic for gossip and discussion” at one quarterly meeting.⁵⁹

Celibacy was another trait of early itinerancy following the tradition of Asbury and St. Paul. Marriage and family life were considered bad influences.⁶⁰ However, there were temptations for such men right from the beginning.⁶¹ “Half the girls on the circuit would like to marry you,” Eggleston wrote about his heroic circuit rider.⁶² There was always a “pious young sister” at every station qualified to become wife to the manly itinerant.⁶³ So, one should not ignore the appeal of such men to women seeking to be free of parental control and to begin their own families.⁶⁴ Similarly one should not ignore the countercharge that these itinerants were sexual predators arousing female acolytes with uninhibited revivals that released them from all social and parental control.⁶⁵

As these single young muscular men rode the circuits, frequently alone, facing sexual temptations, they did “locate,” i.e., they gave up their life of poverty, settled down, and married within the communities they serviced to use the term of Bishop Asbury.⁶⁶ In his Valedictory Address of 1813, Asbury challenged Methodists not to abandon the way of the apostolic order of the first century for the corruption of big churches in the city.⁶⁷ But Asbury was up against human biology; his ministers had not been liberated from family. Localization represented a rite of passage as the young male preachers left their band of fellow young single warriors braving the wilderness for the married life as an adult member of a settled community.

Localization also reflected a dissatisfaction with the itinerant way of life. To be a warrior of the cross during the blush of early manhood is one thing, to engage in such nonstop combat for life is quite another. What was

⁵⁷ Leon H. Vincent, *John Heyl Vincent: A Biographical Sketch* (Freeport, NY: Libraries Press, 1970, reprint 1925), 15. The “good wit” of these talkers has been collected in Byrne.

⁵⁸ Cited in Cunningham, 16.

⁵⁹ Eggleston, 196, 248.

⁶⁰ Andrews, 110, 218; Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 139; Russell E. Richey, *The Methodist Conference in America: A History* (Nashville: Kingswood Books/Abingdon Press, 1996), 58.

⁶¹ Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 173.

⁶² Eggleston, 232.

⁶³ David L. Kimbrough, *Reverend Joseph Tarkington: Methodist Circuit Rider From Frontier Evangelism to Refined Religion* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 67.

⁶⁴ Andrews, 219.

⁶⁵ Andrews, 210.

⁶⁶ Andrews, 215-217; Johnson, *The Frontier Camp Meeting*, 156.

⁶⁷ *JLFA* 3:475, 492.

appropriate for professional celibates and warriors like Asbury didn't necessarily work with men who wanted a settled life in this world. The "martyr-spirit" of Asbury made normal life impractical which contributed to the dropout rate of mere mortals. As circuit rider Thomas Ware looked back in 1840 on these early days and asked how could one expect men to remain itinerants when "there was no provision made for superannuated men."⁶⁸ Martyrs-by-choice do not require pension plans and health insurance, but these American warriors of the cross hoped to live the American Dream in this world.

The itinerant preacher was a full member of the annual conference, the local preacher was not. The local preacher was considered to a lay preacher, whereas the traveling preacher represented a step up the organizational hierarchy towards being ordained as deacon and elder.⁶⁹ Tension between these two types of preachers, the settled local preacher and the circuit rider, was not unknown. Class meetings, the small group in a local community who met to pray, study, witness, and help each other, thrived during the heyday of the circuit rider who did work with the local preacher.⁷⁰ When the system fell into decline, there was a vacuum which needed to be filled to bring people together in the community for study.

Circuit riders continued to ride in the post-Civil War era, now sometimes by train just as circuit lawyer Lincoln had done. Even in rural America, times had changed. Many preachers were located now and there was a shift in emphasis to the construction of churches and parsonages, and the financial responsibilities and obligations of maintaining fixed assets in a settled town. The local church was becoming the center of Methodist life.⁷¹ The prosaic life marked the success of Methodism even as it signified the boredom of routine. Once the golden age had passed, Methodists began to look back with nostalgia and yearning for the bygone era.

As one might expect with the heroes of old, their stories were told again in fictionalized form. The previously-mentioned novel—*The Circuit Rider: A Tale of the Heroic Age* (1878) by Edward Eggleston, the former circuit rider and Sunday school activist, now writing in Brooklyn—extolled the hero from an earlier time. A novelist had the opportunity to weave these many strands into a single narrative story that provides a fuller picture than the dry academic tome awash in footnotes. He portrayed his heroic circuit rider as a modern Knights Templar who could regain Eden only by vanquishing the devils which threatened it. As one might expect in a novel on the American West, the hero had a showdown at high noon with the forces

⁶⁸ Thomas Ware, *Sketches*, 1840, 214, quoted in Norwood, "The Shaping of Methodist Ministry," 342.

⁶⁹ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 133.

⁷⁰ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 130-132.

⁷¹ James E. Kirby, Russell E. Richey, and Kenneth E. Rowe, *The Methodists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 142.

of darkness before prevailing and triumphantly riding off in the sunset with the woman who completes him.

Nonetheless, the details of the story help illuminate the actual historical situation which real circuit riders faced. Eggleston's circuit rider from the heroic age faced personal circumstances that reflected larger issues. His hero did find true love and live happily ever after, but consider the pitfalls and travails he overcame from his future wife, Patty, "whose aristocratic Virginia pride would regard marriage with a Methodist as worse than death"⁷² Methodists were "rude, vulgar, and poor" opposed to "dancing and jewelry" and devoid of "gentility."⁷³ Eventually, of course, she saw the light and overcame her elitist pride for true love and God's amazing grace. The Tidewater aristocrat married the back country Methodist. The heroic fighter who confronted two bullies had brought order to chaos and married the local princess. How often does this oldest of human stories continue to be told?

As swashbuckling heroes sallied forth to rid the world of evil, the humble reader could take comfort in their glorious adventure. The success of Eggleston's heroes permitted the reader to remain in this earthly paradise protected from evil by these "knights on white horses," at least as long as the reader was absorbed by the novel.⁷⁴ But what about when the reader was forced to return to the real world? How did these stories and the reputations of the heroes of the past weigh upon the lives of those would-be warriors born of light born after the publication of the autobiographies of Cartwright and Finley?

Like the American Pilgrims or the Mycenaean heroes, these American Methodist heroes from days of yore established a standard for future warriors of the cross to meet. One did not enter into the arena of combat without an awareness of the legacy of the giants of the past. Each man in his own way then had to resolve to his own satisfaction where he stood when measured against the mythical figures from the olden days of blessed memory. Each individual region within the Methodist umbrella tended to praise the circuit rider as well as the source of their success. Here are three examples.

(1) Tennessee – In a preface dated 1893, Holston historian Price noted the departure of the Methodists of the present "from the first principle and the old landmarks of Methodism" and hoped to stir them to the cause of "simplicity, self-denial, earnestness, and spiritual power of the fathers" of a hundred years ago.⁷⁵ Price asserted it was incumbent upon the present to "rescue from oblivion the noble men and women" of old who had successfully "planted the Methodism which we now enjoy."⁷⁶

⁷² Eggleston, 131.

⁷³ Eggleston, 173-174.

⁷⁴ Martin, 114.

⁷⁵ Price, I:v.

⁷⁶ R. N. Price, *Holston Methodism: From Its Origin to the Present Time, Vol. II: From the Year 1804 to the Year 1824* (Nashville, Publishing house of the M.E. Church, South, 1906), v.

(2) Ohio – An 1909 Methodist history recalled the efforts of “the faithful preacher [who] was tracking his way from settlement to settlement, hunting after the scattered sheep of his Master’s fold,” citing the words of President William. H. Harrison characterizing them as “a body of men who, for zeal and fidelity in the discharge of the duties they undertake, are not exceeded by any others in the whole world.”⁷⁷ The chapter concluded with the encomium, “All honor be to their memory!”⁷⁸

(3) Upper Iowa – The Upper Iowa Conference looked back on the recent golden age of itinerants as if it had been the apostolic age itself.⁷⁹ Their words in 1906 about life 50 years earlier take on added meaning when one realizes that preachers in the present with their “elegant and spacious churches” and “palace cars” were indirectly being chastised for not living up to the ideals of the heroes of the past who did not count “it a hardship to go from place to place and travel these extensive circuits” but “went forth joyfully, esteeming it a privilege to help lay the foundations of the church in a new country.”⁸⁰

Here again, one observes the heroic stature of the circuit riders of old and the contrast to the settled times of the 1906-present. In the new settled world of middle-class respectability, heroes were in short supply. It’s hard to write an epic novel about quotidian life. Where then could a Methodist be a hero? What arena could they enter to do battle with Satan as the heroic forebears had done? How could they be warriors for light when the frontier had closed and the wilderness was no more? A century ago, Methodism faced challenges that Asbury had never dreamed of a mere century earlier.

⁷⁷ *History of Preble County, Ohio* (Cleveland: H. Z. Williams, 1881), 35, 64.

⁷⁸ Williams, 67.

⁷⁹ Fellows, 45.

⁸⁰ Fellows, 51.