

## THE METHODIST UPPER IOWA CONFERENCE: FROM WILDERNESS TO MELTING POT

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The Methodist mission in America is to reform a continent. Methodists undertook that mission beginning in 1784 in a country that saw itself as a “city on a hill.” By the 1820s, such a question assumed a new perspective as Methodists had become the leading denomination in the United States. Therefore, it is legitimate to inquire how these two senses of identity coexisted. This study seeks to investigate this issue for a conference, an organizational unit within the Methodist Episcopal Church. The conference chosen is the Upper Iowa Conference in what was once the wilderness and now is the heartland of the country. This examination will cover the first 60 years of its existence when it went from settling in a wilderness to being part of a melting pot.

### Setting the Stage: The Beginnings

One of the ways to trace the expansion of America westward is through the growth of the Methodist conferences. As settlement in the wilderness expanded, so did the number of conferences. New conferences were created and existing ones were divided to accommodate the needs of the growing population. As soon as the Black Hawk War of 1833 was concluded, Methodist pioneers began to extend the infrastructure which defined their religion into this newly available land. The first Methodist and perhaps Protestant sermon preached in Iowa was in a tavern in Dubuque (later part of the Upper Iowa Conference) in 1833. A meeting house for the society and for holding class meetings was created in 1834; a quarterly conference was begun in 1835; a Sunday School was started in 1836. This rapid pattern would be repeated in community after community as the wilderness lands were settled by the incoming families on the forefront of civilization. One Iowan historian referred to this period from 1833 to 1839 as a time of “government without laws,” a reminder of the role of religion in taming not the wilderness but the settlers in the wilderness.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the region was part of the existing Illinois conference. In 1840, it became part of the new Rock River Conference before becoming part of

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<sup>1</sup> *Minutes of the Second Session of the Upper Iowa Annual Conference Annual of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1895*, 204; Cyrenus Cole, *A History of the People of Iowa* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Torch Press, 1921), 133-135; Stephen Norris Fellows, *History of the Upper Iowa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church 1856-1906* (Cedar Rapids, IA: Laurance Press, 1907), 10, 12-14, 33, 36, 154, 241, 243.

the Iowa Conference in 1844. Finally in 1856, the Upper Iowa Conference was established with 70 members. That first conference in 1840 was held in conjunction with a camp meeting full of tents in accordance with the traditional Methodist experience. Preachers would arrive at these conferences on horseback, by carriage or covered wagons, or by swimming unbridged rivers and crossing roadless prairies in accordance with their motto “anyway to get there.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Golden Age: The Time of Heroes**

These first years became a golden age for the Upper Iowa Conference. In his “Historical Sketch of Upper Iowa Methodism” at the annual conference in 1894, R. W. Keeler waxed poetic: “The prairie that had for centuries constituted the home of the buffalo and the deer and the hunting grounds of the red men that roamed over them, had become immense fields of corn and wheat, and the abode of civilization.” This paean to the transformation which had occurred was repeated in 1906 when the Conference celebrated its 50th anniversary as it too, recalled the blank slate its members had settled, “For centuries these beautiful prairies had lain in virgin loveliness untouched by the hand of civilized man.” One sees here the image of America as a garden awaiting humankind to be placed there by the Lord as had been done in the biblical account—as soon as the one impediment was removed—“Thousands of people were waiting impatiently for the removal of the red man from such a fair land.” Once that obstacle had been cleared, the “valley resounded to the woodman’s axe.” Thus, by 1906, the Upper Iowa Conference could exclaim, “The vast unsettled prairies have become covered with immense fields of grain and are the abode of civilization.” This echoed the 1894 “Historical Sketch” and from the 1895 Semi-Centennial sermon. As the Lord had “planted” Israel in the Promised Land and the Puritans in their City on a Hill with an errand in the wilderness, so God had placed the Methodists in the new American wilderness.<sup>3</sup>

Heroes in Upper Iowa had transformed the land from primitive wilderness to civilized wonder. Amidst the trials and tribulations of the pioneers recounted in the history one individual stood out above all others, the itinerant preacher, “a brave and heroic man.” The Conference took great pride in their Methodist founding fathers being (younger) contemporaries of the founding fathers of American Methodism. Here one observed the practical genius of the vastly successful itinerant system. Every settler was contacted by an itinerant preacher. These early circuits extended hundreds of miles and were named after the natural topography as people settled in the

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<sup>2</sup> Fellows, 24,38-39, 223; Aaron W. Haines, *The Makers of Iowa Methodism: A Twentieth-Century Memorial to the Pioneers* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1900), 143-144; *Proceedings of the Second Iowa Methodist State Convention held at Des Moines, Iowa, May 31, June 1 and 2, 1881*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Keeler, “Historical Sketch of Upper Iowa Methodism,” *Minutes*, 1894, 205. The title of a chapter in a 1921 history of the people of Iowa expresses the same attitude: “The Prairies Primeval” (Cole 123). Fellows, 1, 9, 10, 52.

groves, on the prairies, and by the creeks and rivers.<sup>4</sup>

Golden ages can be contrasted with a less hallowed present. Even in 1857, the Upper Iowans wondered if they were worthy of the challenge they faced: “Instead of shrinking from the context, we should buckle on our armour, and grasping the standard of truth and right, march boldly to the strife . . . Will we prove worthy sons of noble sires? Will we be true to the trust committed to our hands?” This message was repeated in 1894 in the “Historical Sketch of Upper Iowa Methodism”:

We must not take time to detail these experiences [of the pioneer preachers], further than to say that there were passages in them, most marvelous and full of inspiration. If they should be written in full, they would seem more like a well wrought romance than like veritable history,—more like the creations of the imagination, than the actual experiences of men!

In these remarks, one may glimpse the actions of the lay preacher, Sunday School teacher, and church builder in the small communities of the land.<sup>5</sup>

The 1906 Upper Iowa Conference quoted with pride the comment of President Roosevelt—which in turn echoed the sentiments expressed by President Harrison in 1841—“The pioneer preacher did more than all other forces combined to shape the character and create the standards of growing western civilization.” These itinerants were not formally educated. Their expertise was in the “plain meaning of the Bible,” in their ability to readily apply it to the needs of their backcountry wilderness audience. “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.” The singing of “Amazing Grace” was more powerful than the prepared sermons read by the educated preachers of the learned religions. These circuit riders truly were regarded as heroes, a brotherhood of the selfless who competed for the most wild and desolate circuit oblivious to earthly honors.<sup>6</sup>

These words about life fifty years earlier take on added meaning when one realizes that preachers in the present were indirectly being chastised for not living up to the ideals of the heroes of the past even though the conditions of life in Iowa had dramatically changed. The words of the conference historian mocked the failure of the pastors of the present “who live[d] in nicely furnished parsonages” and a world of material comfort in contrast to “the fathers, [who] toiled and suffered and died to make possible the privileges and luxuries you now enjoy.” Here again, one observes the heroic stature of the circuit riders of old and the contrast to the settled times of the present. Without being too subtle, Thomas Fleming in his tribute to the itinerants cried out:

What we need is a vision as was given to the old prophets and apostles. Abram had a vision . . . And Abram obeyed . . . Moses had vision . . . And he obeyed . . . Isaiah

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<sup>4</sup> Fellows, 37-38, 224-226, 227.

<sup>5</sup> Keeler, 1894, 205.

<sup>6</sup> Fellows, 44-45, 229, Thomas Fleming, “A Tribute to the Pioneer Preacher,” in Fellows, 251, 254, 259-260.

had a vision . . . . And Isaiah cried, "Here am I, send me!" . . . Peter, James, and John had a vision . . . . Saul of Tarsus had a vision . . . . Great God, give us to-day, a vision of spiritual and eternal realities!<sup>7</sup>

### Snakes in the Grass

What was the mission of the Methodists to be in this settled and civilized world? How was one to become a hero? What vision was to be fulfilled? Fleming's cry reflected the changes which had occurred in the settled land. The threat of the old obstacles to settlement had ceased and new ones had emerged in the now civilized world. These challenges were cultural, social, and demographic and required a new response from Upper Iowa Conference Methodists if they were to be overcome and the Methodist way of life was to be maintained.

Demon rum was foremost among these threats. The Conference played a major role in the temperance movement not just within the state but in national Methodism as well. In its maiden conference Upper Iowa declared its support for temperance, a position it would hold for decades to come. A key figure in this resolution was Congressman Hiram Price whose "life has run parallel with the history of Iowa Methodism" from his arrival in 1844 to 1900 when this history was written and he still lived. At the first State Methodist Convention, held in 1871, he spoke on "The Responsibility of the Christian Citizen in Regard to the Liquor Business in Iowa":

The professing Christians of Iowa are in the majority. They make the laws and elect the officers whose duty it is to execute these laws . . . . If the laws of Iowa and the officers of the law do not accomplish what God and humanity require, it follows as a consequence that professing Christians are at fault . . . . By temperance, I mean total abstinence . . . . Let the professing Christians of all denominations lead the way in signing and keeping the pledge of total abstinence, and the world would soon rejoice in the overthrow of King Alcohol and his supporters.

His words were echoed at the Convention by Senator George C. Wright.<sup>8</sup>

Tobacco didn't fare well in the Upper Iowa Conference either. Unlike alcohol which Methodism since Wesley had condemned orally and officially, tobacco was a tolerated disgusting habit which was not prohibited. However, in 1867, the Conference did adopt a resolution which called on those addicted to the noxious weed "to refrain therefrom, through self-denial." By 1871, the Conference realized the rule was useless so "we affectionately request our brethren in bondage, to come out into the liberty of the Gospel, and show by their example that they can consistently preach the power of the Gospel to save from all *sin* and from all filthiness." This plea was followed in 1872 with a prohibition against the use of tobacco by ministers, elders, and deacons plus a backdated two-year prohibition against anyone seeking to become a minister, elder, or deacon.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Fellows, 51; Fleming, 244-245.

<sup>8</sup> Haines, 82-86.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Ruth A. Gallaher, *A Century of Methodism in Iowa, 1844-1944* (Mount Vernon, IA: Inter-Conference Commission on the Iowa Centennial of Methodism, 1944), 35.

Other noxious habits appeared to tarnish the Methodist way of life as well. Roller-skating was characterized as a “pernicious device” which was “one of the latest devices of the enemy of all good.” This destructive and very unhealthy activity proved that the world indeed was a troubled one with forces of evil lurking everywhere one turned.<sup>10</sup>

### **Education: The New Weapon**

Methodists fought back. One critical weapon in the war to maintain the hard-won world the heroes had created was education. The stakes were high:

The fact cannot be questioned nor overlooked, that here in the Mississippi valley is to be fought the great battle of human rights and pure Christianity. Here are centering the forces antagonistic to religion, and here must be raised up the agencies and powers to meet and conquer those forces. Leave the education of our youth to be conducted under the influence of a corrupt Christianity, or even without any religious influence, and the future of our land is dark and gloomy.

This passage from the 1857 Conference was repeated in the fiftieth anniversary history. In effect, education was the Cross which defended the people against the forces of darkness, the wooden stake with which one could vanquish the corrupt Christianity of Catholicism (or secularists). Knowledge was a precious gift from God and its transmission to children was a sacred mission. Education of the young meant even the misguided ways of the parents could be overcome by preventing them from continuing their corruption into the next generation.<sup>11</sup>

With the decline of the class meeting, circuit system, and lay preacher, what then had arisen in its place other than the learned educated permanently-stationed minister? How were the Methodist young to be educated? The era of the camp meeting as the arena of battle had ended and a new venue for training the warriors of light in the millennial showdown against the forces of darkness had arisen. Now the Sunday School emerged to attract “intelligent men and women” to enlist in the battle against “Satan’s kingdom.” The school was “God’s agency” and the international lesson plan promulgated by John Heyl Vincent in 1874 had been providential just as the camp meeting had been in its time. Its lessons fortified young people against the educated skeptics who assaulted it. Such developments could only be the result one thing:

We think we can see the hand of Providence in shaping and developing this benevolent conception, from its birth in the warm heart of a Robert Raikes [an 18th century founder of Sunday Schools], down to its present extensive application and its present international magnitude and catholicity.

Divine Providence had developed this weapon precisely in an age of skepticism and “frivolous infidelity.” In the Sunday School, Iowa Methodists

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<sup>10</sup> *Minutes*, 1884, 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Minutes*, 1857, 24; Fellows, 54.

saw the coming of the kingdom of God:

The nations are already feeling the unifying power of the Word of God through the modern Sunday-school. The tidal wave is rolling all along the shores of Central Europe. The grand swell is felt in Asia and even the regions that are beyond . . . . Already it overshadows the whole earth with the blessings of its branches. It is the kingdom of God as the Savior saw it, and as history is beginning to realize.

What a glorious time to be alive as an Iowa Methodist Sunday School teacher as the millennial age was about to begin, thanks in part to their own efforts!<sup>12</sup>

Presumably the Upper Iowa Conference shared these views expressed at the state level in 1881. The annual conference minutes recorded the progress of the Sunday School. The Conference also was keen to favorably compare itself to others in the field of education: “May it not be truthfully affirmed that Upper Iowa Conference has done and is doing more for the Christian education of her people than any other conference in world-wide Methodism?” But even as the Methodists did their share in their own institutions, such efforts weren’t enough to produce the desired results.<sup>13</sup>

The Conference also needed to address the growing significance of the public school system. The thirty hours per week spent in public school dwarfed what the one-hour per week Sunday School could achieve in the moral and Christian development of children. The Conference could state with pride that from the elementary schools to the state colleges, the teachers were overwhelmingly Christian and “Not a line of infidel or anti-Christian sentiment can be found in any text book or any public educational institution.” The concern the Methodists had was with the growing lapse in moral education by the secular state schools. Fortunately, in Iowa so many of the public school teachers also were Sunday School teachers so the Methodists felt secure since they dominated both the public and Sunday school systems.<sup>14</sup>

This concern for education extended to the college level. The 1902 conference report contained a nostalgic extract from an address by the President of Northwestern University about the heroes from Methodism’s early years. As the speaker waxed eloquent about the activities of his own circuit-rider father, he called upon the Methodist preacher of the present “to be a still more active and aggressive force on behalf of higher education than was his predecessor of sixty years ago.” He sought the best men and women “to make Northwestern University not only the leading Methodist university in the country, but one of the leading universities of the world.”<sup>15</sup>

The Upper Iowa Conference took care to note that its religion had been founded in a college (Oxford), that American Methodists had created a college almost immediately upon its establishment, and that numerous

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<sup>12</sup> *Proceedings*, 168, 169, 173.

<sup>13</sup> Fellows, 238.

<sup>14</sup> Fellows, 239; *Proceedings*, 101, 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Minutes*, 1902, n.p.

colleges had been created throughout the land to keep pace with the burgeoning membership. But there was a threatening void which needed to be filled: “We . . . shall be glad when Methodist American youth shall find open to them a great post-graduate institution of the church in which they may pursue their work as specialists without coming in contact with the rationalism of European schools.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition, a new form of education had emerged which the Upper Iowa Conference sought to use:

Among the mighty agencies for good and evil among men, one of the most potent is the press . . . Very much of the success realized by our church in its past history has undeniably been due to the efficient help the press has given the pulpit, but there has never been a time when the pulpit and the church stood in greater need of this assistance than to-day.

The importance of Christian education to the greatest growth and final triumph to the cause of Christ cannot be overestimated. . . .

The last sentence referred the local Cornell College and Upper Iowa University. With weapons such as these, victory was assured, wasn’t it?<sup>17</sup>

As it turned out, the written word was a two-edged sword. Long before the radio, television, and the internet functioned independent of parental control, the written word had arrived in Iowa in ways deemed unsuited for a bible-reading people. On this issue, the language of the Conference report could reach apocalyptic proportion as this excerpt vividly demonstrates:

No one can contemplate without great distress the spread of vile and pernicious literature, especially among the young, which is poisoning the very foundations of our social life. The marvelous growth of the secular press is one of the wonderful facts of this wonderful century; but while we rejoice in the consequent increase of knowledge, there is great reason to fear that the exclusive reading of secular newspapers corrupted as they are by a too prevalent worldly and even irreligious bias, will too soon bring about a secularization of the thoughts of the people and the total destruction of spiritual life and aspirations.

The subsequent conference warned against “the cheap, trashy publications that in time past have found their way into our schools” because the “dark current of corrupt and pernicious publication as it flows into society and out homes is cause for alarm.” So even as the Conference paid tribute to the departed part-time Methodist and American hero, Ulysses S. Grant, it expressed concern about the secular media and “trash print.” These condemnations also highlighted the need to be involved in a larger arena if the battle to preserve their way of life was to be won.<sup>18</sup>

### **The New Battlefield: The Political Arena**

The Upper Iowa Conference actively participated in social issues from its moment of creation. The first conference in 1856 declared its opposition

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<sup>16</sup> *Minutes*, 1900, 53.

<sup>17</sup> *Minutes*, 1882, 166; *Minutes*, 1883, 239.

<sup>18</sup> *Minutes*, 1884, 33; *Minutes*, 1885, 109-110, 116, 122.

to slavery. In 1857, it denounced the Dred Scott decision. In 1861, the Conference supported President Lincoln against the “wicked rebellion.” The following year it adopted a resolution calling for the immediate emancipation of the slaves. Then in 1864, it supported the call for a Soldiers’ Orphan Asylum. It also criticized President Andrew Johnson. The 1906 conference was proud of its heritage in condemning slavery and of the close ties between the Methodists and Lincoln. But new issues had emerged right in its own backyard that radically changed the political dynamic in the state.<sup>19</sup>

The reports of the Conference in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century tell the story of a people confronting what they perceived as a new threat to their way of life. The world had changed quickly. One moment the Iowa Methodists were celebrating the victory of the Union (1865), the centennial of Methodism in America (1866), a part-time Methodist who had become president of the United States after having led the Union armies to victory (1868-1876), and the centennial of America (1876), and then suddenly they were fighting an old threat which they didn’t expect to see on their doorsteps.

Iowa Methodists needed a new type of hero to wrest the god-fearing people from the “evil clutches” of Romanism. The days of the heroic individual successfully defending the camp meeting from intruders or other Protestant denominations was over. The scale of the conflict had increased significantly. The apocalyptic description of the state vote on prohibition by the *Iowa State Register* on June 25, 1882, reflects the new field of battle:

The two armies on the contest over the amendment move into the field to-morrow for the contest on Tuesday. To-day the two legions are passing by; to-morrow they will be camped on the threshold of the day of conflict, each under its own colors . . . . No fairer army ever moved under fairer banners than that which is going now into the field of open contest to battle for the amendment . . . .

Here is the other army—the army of occupation, silent, sullen and dark. It puts no song on the air, and has no flag to give to the breeze, and no voice in all the earth praying for it . . . .

Alcohol-loving Germans were not the only aliens to occupy the fair land. Demographic trends of post-Civil War America affected the Midwest. The report of an Upper Iowa district at the 1883 Conference contained the following concern about local events: “Upon the river borders Catholicism and German rationalism press upon us. Rum and Rome and Rationalism practically coalesce while Protestantism, pressed into the minority, instinctively ‘rises and retires.’”<sup>20</sup> In the Upper Iowa Conference, the battle against foreign elements resumed with gusto in 1885. The Conference resolved to support the Evangelical Protestant Association in its efforts to evangelize the foreign population amidst the large cities of the country. It

<sup>19</sup> *Minutes*, 1857, 32; 1861, 35-36; 1862, 41-42; 1864, 23; and 1866, 13-14; Fellows, 81-87.

<sup>20</sup> *Minutes*, 1881, 94; quoted in Don Elbert Clark, “The History of Liquor Legislation in Iowa, 1878-1908,” *The Iowa Journal of History* 1908, 6:521-522; *Minutes*, 1883, 225. See Clark, 520-530, 606-607; Cole 421; Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971), 93-99.



resolved that Romanism had to be stopped. Here was a long-standing battle well known to Protestants.

The stakes were getting higher and the divisions deeper. Alcohol had repeatedly threatened to create one-issue elections between irreconcilable peoples in the state. At this propitious moment when all that was good and holy in life seemed under attack, Fayette County Republican, William Larrabee, from the land of the Upper Iowa Conference, was elected governor in 1885 and 1887. Larrabee said at his inaugural on January 14, 1886:

The saloon is the education[al] institution which takes no vacation or recess and where the lowest and most pernicious political doctrines are taught. Its thousands of graduates may be found in all positions of wretchedness and disgrace, and are the most successful candidates for our poorhouses and penitentiaries. It is the bank where money, time, strength, manliness, self-control and happiness are deposited to be lost, where drafts are drawn on the widows and orphans, and where dividends are paid only to his Satanic Majesty. Let it perish.

Larrabee recognized that the ban on alcohol had been enforced inadequately and therefore concluded that the prohibition amendment had not been given a fair test. On May 3, he issued an ultimatum which called on the “true Christian spirit of our people” and exhorted all citizens to obey the law.<sup>21</sup>

That same year at the Upper Iowa Conference, Methodists celebrated the over 4,000 souls “brought from darkness to light, from the power of Satan into God,” warned again about the pernicious evil of books which were infesting the community, called for the protection of the Chinese immigrants, and, despaired of the many “towns and cities of Iowa [which] are rapidly becoming centers of danger which threaten our religious institutions, by the massing of skeptical and lawless people . . .” These Iowa towns and cities which were perceived to be threats to their way of life were those populated with foreigners, newcomers to the land who were replacing the old-stock native Americans who themselves had been newcomers to the land only decades earlier. It was as if the Upper Iowa Conference Methodists were watching all their hard work come to naught. Everything they had built and struggled to achieve was being undone by an alien presence of those who did not live what they perceived as the American way of life.<sup>22</sup>

In 1886, the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions was launched. Its goal was “the evangelization of the world in our generation.” That became the title of the book in 1900 by John Mott, the Methodist layman who had graduated from the Upper Iowa University in 1885 and had become the driving force for the movement. But the missionary activity stressed by the Upper Iowa Conference in 1887 was domestic not foreign:

Throughout a wide area on either side of the Mississippi river, a foreign immigration has been steadily driving out our native population and has so weakened our Churches as to make it impossible in some cases and difficult in many, to maintain our existence.

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<sup>21</sup> Cole, 463, 465; Quoted in Clark, 551, 555.

<sup>22</sup> *Minutes*, 1886, 200, 201, 203-204, 205.

The threat of Romanism and infidelity loomed large on the Midwestern plains. There were some signs of progress. A state-mandated survey showed that the number of saloons in Fayette County had declined from twenty-two to zero in 1887. Still, the people knew they were part of a wider economic and cultural confrontation.<sup>23</sup>

At the annual conference in 1888, the Upper Iowans were called to battle. *Methodist Review* editor, Dr. Mendenhall, outlined in a speech to the Conference the actions the Methodists were called upon to take in their “aggressive evangelism” in their home state. His journal contained the “living practical issues” which Methodists needed to address. Given the power of the press for good and evil, Mendenhall felt it was incumbent upon the genius of Methodism to utilize the press in the spread of holiness. The Upper Iowa Conference passed a resolution championing the reading of this journal and the use of Methodist materials in the Sunday Schools. Other resolutions advocated temperance including the support of Republicans, the dominant political party in Iowa which had secured one of the best prohibitory laws ever enacted. The violations of the Lord’s Day by the U.S. Mail, railways, and streetcars also were condemned along with the pleasure-seeking greed of worldliness. The culture wars were in full swing.<sup>24</sup>

Politically, things came to a boil with the 1889 governor’s race. Just before the November election, the annual Upper Iowa Conference resolved that “no Methodist voter should permit himself to be controlled by party organizations which are managed in the interests of the liquor traffic.” This call upon Methodists not to support a party controlled by the liquor traffic meant they must “VOTE REPUBLICAN.” A resolution called upon every Methodist preacher and intelligent layman to support *Methodist Review*. Furthermore, the assault on the Sabbath was condemned vociferously. The desecration of the Sabbath was a national peril not only because of Sunday newspapers and all the traditional violators who had been condemned for years but because of “Sunday games such as base ball” That were being played right there in Iowa.<sup>25</sup>

Still there were dissenting voices and economic issues to be considered as well. Some people countered that in a state of diverse cultural and religious values, absolute prohibition was unworkable. Farmers had legitimate economic issues which needed to be addressed. An inflexible Republican Party simply provided an opening for a more nimble Democratic Party. In the end, former Republican-turned-Democrat Horace Boies won the 1889 election by a narrow 1.8% margin. Democrats built on the triumph in the 1889 gubernatorial election and won a majority of the Congressional seats by 6 to 5, including District 4 in Upper Iowa Conference territory. The 1890 census showed Iowa to be divided between 40% pietist (Protestant) and 29% liturgical (Catholic) with 31% nonmembers. This division revealed the lines

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<sup>23</sup> *Minutes*, 1887, 277; Clark 561.

<sup>24</sup> *Minutes*, 1888, 45-47.

<sup>25</sup> *Minutes*, 1889, 118, 119, 121.

of the new battlefield.<sup>26</sup>

### **Babel: Mixed Multitude in a Land Once Methodist**

The battle against the Papacy continued to be as much a concern in Upper Iowa where the Protestants were the majority as it had been in the heyday of the religious wars in Europe. America and the Protestant Bible were one:

The substitution of parochial for public schools can never be tolerated, nor can we permit the perversion of the common school to parochial or sectarian purposes. The Christianity of the Bible is part and parcel of American and English common law, and is no more sectarian than infidelity is a religion. With the Bible in the school, duly read, and revered, as in days of old, no school can be justly called "Godless. Let us get back to the ancient American landmarks.

With this exhortation, the people who had been called upon to reform a continent were called upon to save the country. The people who once had no need to elect politicians now championed an amendment to the American Constitution which would still preserve freedom of religion for all including Catholics but which would specifically prohibit the expenditure of taxpayer funds for any activities of a "church, religious denomination, or religious society, or any institution, society or undertaking which is wholly or in part, under sectarian or ecclesiastical control." No taxpayer money for church-controlled schools exhorted the Protestants. Separation of church and state was to be rigorously enforced especially since the state was Protestant.<sup>27</sup>

The battle raged on against the foreign element. It can be tracked in the annual report of the districts. For example, in 1892, Decorah reported an heroic effort against the depletion of its eastern borders: it was fighting the good fight to hold the territory for Protestant Christianity. Dubuque Methodists declared that even in the midst of a Roman Catholic population, it was not dead. This conflict was no idle matter to the people who had settled the prairies only a few decades before only now to find themselves fighting for their cultural and religious life in the land they regarded as home.<sup>28</sup>

By the time of the 1898 Upper Iowa Conference, the problem of aliens abroad was related with that of aliens at home. The Upper Iowa Conference looked upon the newly acquired Spanish islands as areas of opportunity while noting the need to evangelize the "alien races here," specifically, "the lands once occupied by the pioneer Methodist population." At the same time as one war was won overseas, the war continued to be fought at home. The 1899 Conference report from the Davenport district asked the question: "Am I in the United States of America, or Scandinavia, or the Emerald Isle, or Germany?" and in doing so echoed the words Benjamin Franklin wrote in

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<sup>26</sup> Clark, 575; Jensen, 88, 102-111, 180-181; Samuel Merrill, *Bourbon Democracy of the Middle West: 1865-1896* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1953), 204; *Minutes*, 1890, 196. During the elections of 1894-1902, District 4 went from being safely Republican to being overwhelmingly Republican (Jensen, 114; Paul Peirce, "Congressional Districting in Iowa," *The Journal of Iowa History and Politics*, 1 [1903, 354]).

<sup>27</sup> *Minutes*, 1891, 273, 274.

<sup>28</sup> *Minutes*, 1892, 26; *Minutes*, 1893, 111.

1751 in response to German immigration in Pennsylvania. Now these alien immigrants from Scandinavia and Germany among elsewhere continued to overrun the land threatening the Methodist and therefore American way of life. The problem was exacerbated by the original Protestant settlers moving west thus depleting the church membership.<sup>29</sup>

The issue of the foreigner in the land continued to attract attention and heightened rhetoric. The Decorah district in 1902 reported a disturbing trend in the once-Methodist lands:

... [T]he stranger has got possession of the gates, and the native American Methodist farmer seems, and feels himself to be, a stranger in the new surroundings. Germans, Scandinavians, Bohemians and Irish are buying the farms all the more easily, because the American early settlers have reached years when they wish the rest they have earned and the advantages of town life and have the means to gratify the desire. The new occupants bring with them Romanism, Lutheranism, or hatred of all churches, and whatever the form it is in the antagonism to Methodism. Notwithstanding, we are still optimistic, because we believe in God, the gospel go-ahead-itiveness, which last is a synonym for Methodism.<sup>30</sup>

As portrayed in this report's rhetoric, Upper Iowa Methodists sought to combat the spreading menace from the alien invaders and secularists through education to train a cadre of warriors of light to vanquish this evil.

At best such training was only a long-range solution. In the meantime, the floodtide continued. The 1903 Conference report expressed a similar concern by Decorah. The "exodus of Iowa Methodists goes steadily forward as the northeast corner of Iowa underwent a demographic transformation." The district report concluded:

The preacher who at home faces alien peoples who have taken the place of Methodists, and who have changed the religious conditions of our communities needs to be of firmed fiber to keep from sharing the depression which is to often expressed by his people.<sup>31</sup>

And this report was by someone who was an optimist!

The following year, the Cedar Falls District reported the constant selling by Methodists of land to "foreign-speaking people of non-Methodist affiliations," primarily Roman Catholic or Lutherans. Davenport reported only three Methodist pastors in a county of 45,000 people as the "old stock . . . sold out and moved to the city or died off, and the foreigner [came] in to take the[ir] place . . . . In many places the old church buildings still stand like the Druidic pillars of old England, to mark the glory of the past." Decorah continued to report the dominance of foreigners and Dubuque joined the parade of bemoaning the transformation of the land from one of Protestants to Roman Catholics.<sup>32</sup>

The situation was no better in 1905. Cedar Falls reported the failure of

<sup>29</sup> *Minutes*, 1898, 232; *Minutes*, 1899, 320; *Minutes*, 1900, 59; Benjamin Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961), 4:234.

<sup>30</sup> *Minutes*, 1902, 155.

<sup>31</sup> *Minutes*, 1903, 250, 286, see also 320.

<sup>32</sup> *Minutes*, 1904, 44, 50, 52-53.

Methodists to adequately deal with the challenge presented by this wave of new immigrants, "To abandon the rural districts is to court cowardice and retreat. In some places we are leaving the country churches to die." Davenport sought to focus on the young new arrivals as the most likely candidates for saving: "The spirit of our fathers, who two generations ago reclaimed this territory from frontier barbarism, and the methods of our missionaries in the fatherlands of some of these same foreigners will work out great results for the Master." The evangelization of the world required the Christianization of America which was now a battlefield. Decorah reported that the Pope "evidently has designs on fair Iowa."

In subsequent years, the tone of the Conference minutes became more perfunctory, almost assuming a ritualistic quality. The presence and threat of "infidel foreigners" such as Bohemians and Slavs supplanting American-born Protestants who steadily abandoned the land became an annual castigation and the counter activities to convert them, support temperance, and to denounce the violations of the Sabbath for amusements and sports attained a routine status. The reports had little new to say and one wonders if even the stirring rhetoric of the committee presenters had much of an effect on people who had heard the same thing for years. After all, there were larger issues to address like the marriage amendment to the Constitution so Mormon polygamy would be prohibited and the continuing goal to achieve temperance throughout the land. The observance of Lincoln Day increased.<sup>33</sup>

In the years to come, the Upper Iowa Conference reports continued to chronicle the changes which were affecting the community. The Bohemian threat and the work to combat it remained a staple of the reports. People were still reading Sunday newspapers and seeking the pleasures of amusement parks, vaudeville, moving pictures, and other well-financed degenerating attractions which lead the youth of the land away from Sunday Schools and the Church. But there was cause for hope as well, "The trend of the young people toward our Protestant, English-speaking churches is a most hopeful indication, and if encouraged will solve the problem in many localities for evangelic Christianity." The 1910 report also noted the appearance of evangelist Billy Sunday at a revival in Cedar Rapids. The Conference declared it to be "a great spiritual blessing to the entire district" with over 12,000 in attendance. As expected, the iniquity of the city was contrasted with the awakened evangelism of the rural church.<sup>34</sup>

The 1912 Conference was even more upbeat about the prospects for the community, the state, and the country. Perhaps the long-term plan of educating immigrants to be Americans was finally paying off:

The time is come, or about to come, when the loss of membership on account of the inroad of the foreigner, and the departure of the American is being stayed. In some localities the foreigner is disappearing, and the American is returning to his own. In many other communities the foreigner is becoming so American as to demand

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<sup>33</sup> *Minutes*, 1905, 165, 169, 173, 197; *Minutes*, 1907, 455; *Minutes*, 1908, 52, 74, 75.

<sup>34</sup> *Minutes*, 1909, 188; *Minutes*, 1910, 316, 324, 326, 330-331; *Minutes*, 1911, 470, 489, 490.

English preaching. This is specially true of those of the second generation of the alien . . . . [M]any are finding out that the same reason for coming to America at all is the same reason for coming to the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The following year the Conference report proudly declared that even if the Bohemians had not become Protestants, they have broken with Roman Catholicism. Those born in the country have learned English and have demonstrated a strong proclivity for American institutions. Perhaps America was a melting pot for people who seek to be free after all.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conclusion: The American Civil Religion**

During these years of concern about the foreigners in the land, the Upper Iowa Conference Methodists failed to realize that the new immigrants were following the same path to the American Civil Religion the Methodists had trod. The people whose mission had been to reform a continent and who had not been inhabitants of the City on a Hill now fully embraced their national identity as part of their religion. The 1866 Upper Iowa Conference in its “State of Country” section declared: “Ours is pre-eminently the land of the Bible, and of the Christian Church . . . . [We] believe that our unparalleled national prosperity hitherto, is, in a great degree due to the influence of evangelical religion among all classes.” The Methodists of the Upper Iowa Conference saw themselves as a Providentially blessed people in garden paradise led by heroic men of God creating a kingdom of God in America and on earth. They rejoiced that the scourge of slavery had been banished from the land and mourned the death of the sainted Abraham. They looked to the future where they would reap the benefits of their toil and the sweat of their brow.<sup>36</sup>

The 1891 Conference “Report of the Committee on the Protection of American Institutions” detailed the intertwining of these two components of life on the Iowa fields. The common institutions were the schools, the Sabbath, a free church, and “GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE” (capitalization in the original). This American way of life was threatened by parochial schools, railroads which ran on the Sabbath, and newspapers which published on it. The report looked forward with some trepidation to the havoc the approaching Columbian Exposition which was to take place in Chicago on the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus (actually held in 1893) would wreak.<sup>37</sup>

By this point, the Upper Iowa Conference also could look back with pride on its own history. The 1894 Conference included a report entitled “Historical Sketch of Upper Iowa Methodism.” It traced its history, declaring, “From the first the hand of God was so clearly seen, that the human agents seemed only to follow His divine leadings and marvelous results sprang up.” From pioneers to circuits, to classes, to colleges, the history of this one conference

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<sup>35</sup> *Minutes*, 1912, 43-44; *Minutes*, 1913, 201.

<sup>36</sup> *Minutes*, 1866, 13, 14; Fellows, 84.

<sup>37</sup> *Minutes*, 1891, 272-274.

was recounted in glowing terms. In the semi-centennial sermon of 1895, R. W. Keeler declared:

This is a Christian nation. God is rapidly bringing it to the front. In saving this world, America is coming, more and more, to be the "base of supplies;" hence to mark her rapid progress, and the multiplication of her agencies, is an inspiration to the Christian patriot. As we recount some of these changes, both in the nation and in the Church, we shall see how mightily God is moving, to the consummation of his purpose to bring in the universal reign of Righteousness.

. . . Even in secular history the hand of God is distinctly seen, shaping the forces and controlling the destiny of this most advanced Christian nation.

Again one observes the fusion of the American Civil Religion with the Methodist Church and how much the latter had changed in but a century.<sup>38</sup>

The semi-centennial sermon then proceeded to recount the success of both America and the Methodist Church in America. The opportunity to build a better civilization through the molding of human character was one theme. A second was the passing of the test by the elimination of slavery and the defeat of the dictatorial slave oligarchy. "Evil" and "tested" were the terms used. The Conference fervently embraced technological progress including, each with its own section in the report, the railroad, telegraph, Atlantic cable, telephone, phonograph, electric light, typewriter, and sewing machine, a reminder of how much daily life had changed from a century ago when such devices would have been deemed science fiction if the term had existed. Now people were living in a future unimaginable to their grandparents with every reason to expect continued change for a better life come the new century.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, the "Methodist church, being a child of Providence," was optimistic about its future. The semi-centennial sermon concluded with a ringing endorsement of the success of the Methodist Church in America and the promise of even better things to come:

This conquering host shall enter upon the oncoming century with the swing of victory in her exulting march, and as the decades [of the twentieth century] are numbered, will rejoice in the oncoming day when "the seventh angel shall sound, saying, The Kingdoms of this world become the Kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ: and He shall reign forever and ever." Rev. XI.15.

These feelings of pride and patriotism were only amplified after 1896 when openly Methodist William McKinley became president. When he led America to victory in the global arena over decadent Catholic Spain, what more proof of Divine Providence could one want? After noting "God's providential care," the resolution of appreciation in McKinley's Christian humanitarianism further noted:

what we believe to be the divine intention in the results thus far obtained, that this United States shall become in deed and in truth a leader among the nations of the earth, in liberty and righteousness, and that we are unalterably opposed to any

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<sup>38</sup> Keeler, 1894, 204; idem, "Semi-Centennial Sermon," Minutes, 1895, 296.

<sup>39</sup> Keeler, 1895, 296-299.

settlement of the disposition of the Philippines and other islands that does not grant to their people absolute religious freedom.

McKinley's passing due to an assassination was deeply mourned.<sup>40</sup>

World War I provided the Conference with the opportunity to proclaim its adherence to the American Civil Religion as it had during the Spanish-American War when Methodist McKinley was president. The Committee on the War Situation reported at the 1917 conference "with reference to the great world war":

We believe in the men chosen by a majority of our citizens to lead us through these dark days. We wish to express our appreciation of the clear vision, moral courage, Christian faith and wise statesmanship that has made President Woodrow Wilson already the moral spokesman and leader for the allied nations in this war.

The Conference embraced the vision of make the world safe for Democracy and saluted America for entering this war "with utterly unselfish, generous, high and holy aims and purposes" against "the most selfish, ruthless, conscienceless, brutal and blood-thirsty autocracy the world has ever known." It is an autocracy that is making good on its well known threat to cause the word "Hun" to be a name at the mention of which the world for a thousand years shall shudder. Ministers were called upon to promote patriotism and those who supported the Kaiser should be "deported or interned."<sup>41</sup>

The Upper Iowa Conference saw the war as a triumph for the Melting Pot and the American Civil Religion. At the 1918 conference, the Dubuque district which had been struggling with the impact of immigration reported that the polyglot community now spoke English thanks to the public schools and the great world war. The Conference expressed great optimism about the world to come given the pending Allied victory:

When this war shall come at last to its final end with a peace that shall have in it no compromise with evil, but an end that shall mean an end to all wars, when autocracy shall everywhere be superseded by a world-wide democracy . . . . [W]hen there shall come to us, whose sons are now in this gigantic struggle, the time of the "sunset and evening star," we can look upon the great and eternal gains, that have been secured, and we can say with proud satisfaction, "My children were in that war."<sup>42</sup>

Methodists had given their blood to make God's Kingdom safe for democracy and bleeding alongside of them on the European battlefields over there were the newcomers to the Upper Iowa lands who also had become Americans by choice. As the celebration of the Methodist Centenary approached, Upper Iowa Methodists eagerly anticipated the century to come.

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<sup>40</sup> Keeler, 1895, 301; *Minutes*, 1898, 242; *Minutes*, 1901, 48.

<sup>41</sup> *Minutes*, 1917, 265.

<sup>42</sup> *Minutes*, 1918, 410, 403.