

Book Reviews

CIRCUIT RIDERS OF THE MIDDLE BORDER, A History of Methodism in South Dakota, by the Historical Committee, Matthew D. Smith, Chairman. Midwest Beach Inc., Sioux Falls, So. Dak., 1965. (\$5.00)

Committees can't write books, critics say. They cite the camel as an animal designed by a typical committee which hasn't even yet decided whether the beast should have one or two humps. But up there in South Dakota a committee has authored a book remarkably endowed with unity, coherence, and emphasis—this 320-page story of the dogged but successful effort of spiritual sons of circuit-riding John Wesley on America's Middle Border.

Novelist Hamlin Garland, himself born into a pioneering Methodist family, gave the name Middle Border to that longitudinal streak through America's upper heartland where two frontiers coalesced. One frontier moved westward, noisy with the clang of axes clearing forests, the strident calls of farm boys driving cattle, and the creak and rumble of prairie schooners. The lesser-known frontier originated in the west and as it jogged eastward attracted ranchers and cowboys from Texas and Montana, then miners from California and Colorado. The line on the map marking where these two frontiers met is the Missouri River which slices through the middle of South Dakota.

First recorded act of public worship in that state was performed by devout Jedediah Strong Smith, the mountain man and trapper known to history as the first American to cross overland to California. In 1823 there had been a sharp skirmish with Aricara Indians, and over the body of one young victim Jedediah prayed what a friend called "a powerful prayer." Next Methodist on the Middle Border scene was a 23-year-old itinerant with a name equally mellifluous, Septimus Watson Ingham. This book opens with a word picture of him as "a lone horseman" in the circuit-riding tradition making "an historic journey from the frontier settlement of Sioux City, Iowa, to the land of the Dakotas."

Various authors take up the theme of Methodism rooting itself there, from glacier-ruffled prairies of the eastern half of the state to the rugged Black Hills on the west where "Preacher Smith," a self-appointed missionary to miners in the '76 gold rush, was killed by skulking Sioux as they returned to their reservations after wiping out Custer's command on the Little Big Horn over in Montana. Here is the Epic of Methodism—and of America. Dugouts and sod houses of early settlers, tar-paper shacks of homesteaders and log cabins of miners, have given way to prosperous ranches, farms, and towns. And where the mighty Missouri once rolled unbridled are great lakes that may presage industrial development.

This volume tells that story well—but its emphasis falls upon the people. They are the breed who, in words of Bishop Everett W. Palmer, himself a former hard-rock miner in the Black Hills, "built colleges of granite while they yet dwelt in sod houses." Perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book tells the survival story of their Dakota Wesleyan University.

Founded while buffalo still roamed and before the Sioux were finally pacified, this school somehow has lived through fire and famine, the "dirty thirties" of dustbowl fame, and several organizational snafus. Yet it has been alma mater to four United States Senators (one of them, Clinton P. Anderson, was Secretary of Agriculture), almost all of the 77 foreign missionaries that have gone out from South Dakota Methodism, uncounted pastors many of whom serve in other states, and several general church leaders including Dr. Charles L. Calkins, former executive secretary of the General Board of Pensions.

Circuit Riders of the Middle Border merits study by those contemplating the writing of church history. Its faults, which include the lack of an index, are obvious. But it stands up as an example of how a committee under competent direction can create worthily. This book is comprehensive enough to win favor from the scholar, yet its readable style and numerous illustrations will appeal to the typical lay reader. It is a welcome addition to regional Methodistica.

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