

The Local Preacher

R. E. Harvey

ISSN 0003-4827

No known copyright restrictions.

Recommended Citation

Harvey, R. E. "The Local Preacher." *The Annals of Iowa* 22 (1939), 54-63.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.6060>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

THE LOCAL PREACHER

BY REV. R. E. HARVEY

No just appraisal of the religious forces in pioneer Iowa life is complete without some recognition of an almost extinct genus of layworkers, which, although found in nearly all the Protestant denominations, were best known as Local Preachers, the title bestowed on them by the Methodists. This title was in distinction from the "traveling preachers," or circuit riders, who shifted from place to place at frequent intervals, traveled immense parishes, oftentimes including several counties.

Endowed with the trinity of "gifts, graces, and usefulness" requisite for the ministry, the local preachers employed their talents, as leisure from secular pursuits permitted, in soul-winning and character building as auxiliaries to the regular clergy. Serving as willing pulpit supplies whenever flood, blizzard, sickness, or revival engagement broke in on the fixed pastoral schedule, the local preacher in addition performed without any compensation many other pastoral duties in their communities, such as visiting the sick, burying the dead, holding prayer meetings, organizing Sunday Schools, etc. Some of these layworkers after they had attained ecclesiastical orders enjoyed a notoriety as "marrying preachers," not always as highly approved by the regular ministry as their other activities.

Nearly all callings and professions were represented in the ranks of those helpmates of the church; some ministered to both body and soul, as did Dr. Samuel Fullenwider, founding father of Yellow Spring Presbyterian Church, and leading proponent of Yellow Spring Academy, in Des Moines County. Dr. Joseph Hamilton, organizer of the Methodist Protestant Church in Washington, and surrounding counties was another who ministered to the sick of body and soul. There were attorneys, also, such as the Rectors, father and son, who planted the Methodist Episcopal Church in Sydney, before the advent of any conference representative. Educators like A. J. Heustis, originator of the embryo from whence proceeded Iowa Wesleyan College, at Mt. Pleasant, and Prof. Samuel S.

Howe, whose private seminary at the same place was as highly renowned for its piety as for its scholarship, were still others who joined to their profession the labors of a local preacher. Most of the local preachers who contributed so volubly to the moral and spiritual life of pioneer Iowa were farmers.

There were many other local preachers whose sincerity and earnestness were testimony of the strength of their faith. Rev. John Burns, of the United Brethren Church, preached far and wide in Lee County as a local preacher, attempting no formal organization, leaving his converts to enrich the various churches already extant. Another outstanding local preacher of the early days was Mrs. Elizabeth Atwood, Iowa's first woman preacher, during whose all too brief residence in Dubuque, the one house of worship was filled to capacity, and more, by her eager listeners.

Many of these faithful layworkers after demonstrating their capacity in the subordinate sphere, graduated into the regular ministry, where the practical knowledge of men and affairs they had acquired in business or professional life largely compensated for any scholastic deficiencies. There were others not so well equipped, but who felt the call for usefulness, and willingly acted as "Supply Pastors" on fields that otherwise would have gone uncared for. Always poorly paid, and too often but little appreciated, with no prospect of advancement, and no provision by the Church for their old age, some of them toiled on for many years, their principal reward being the consciousness of doing work which otherwise, without them, would have gone undone. In later years, by a long delayed act of justice, several denominations are according this class of preachers a greater permanency of employment and a share in their pension funds.

An outstanding example of the Supply Pastor at his best was the Rev. John Elliott, who first adorned the Iowa landscape as a wayside blacksmith, in a locality left to one side by the railway lines. Here by virtue of a local preacher's license granted him originally in his native Ireland, he exercised his talents to such purpose that hearers in droves went out from the distant county seats to the revivals held by the "Irish

Blacksmith" in the country school-houses. His efforts resulted in at least two flourishing village churches.

An appreciative Presiding Elder employed him as a Supply on a pastorless circuit, where his efficiency earned for him a recommendation to Annual Conference membership. Episodes of his examination before the committee on ministerial qualifications held fragrant place in ministerial repertoire for half a lifetime:

"Brother Elliott," queried an examiner, "how many sacraments are there?"

"Sacraments is it? Sure there's fower."

"Four? what are they?" The examiner perhaps suspected this son of the Emerald Isle of some Romanistic additions to the recognized Protestant ordinances of Baptism and Holy Communion.

"Weal, sir, the Elder he comes to the fairst quairterly meetin' and we have the fairst sacrament. Thin he comes to the second quairterly meetin' and we have the second sacrament, and the same at the thaird and fowerth quairterly meetins."

Certainly an exact way of setting forth the practice once followed, due to a lack of ordained clergymen, of observing the Lord's Supper only upon the visits of the Presiding Elder, and continued for a century after it ceased to be necessary. But unfortunately for John Elliott, because so lacking in credal lore, that, coupled with other deficiencies, the committee was obliged to refuse him a passing grade.

The sincerity of the man was never more evidenced than afterwards. Nothing daunted, the Irish Blacksmith went to another Supply charge, and another, and another. Bishops and Presiding Elders came and went, but Uncle John Elliott went on for three decades, serving fifteen pastorates of two years each, no more, no less. They were not all of them hard-scrabble circuits either, for his quaint wit, homely common sense, superlative piety and whole souled earnestness made him an acceptable shepherd to flocks boasting of a wider culture than he ever attained. With his fellow workers he was always a brother beloved, willingly helpful, and remarkably free from envy of those who surpassed him in gifts. A successor met him

one day perambulating the streets of a former parish :

“Hello, Uncle John, are you looking up your old tracks?”

“Whist, Brather, I’m joost a-round a-salting yere sheep: tellin’ ’em how much better prachin’ they’ll get from a foine young mainister joost out of college.”

Much of his success perhaps should be attributed to his splendid Irish wife, a genuine mother in Israel, excellent helpmeet, and able at times to outpreach her husband; but especially renowned for never letting an opportunity slip, either public or private, of apprising young theologues of their utter worthlessness until in possession of the right sort of companions. Altogether, a unique useful pair, types for which the molds have been lost in this era of standardization.

The great majority of layworkers, however, could not leave their professions or business for the wandering supply pastorate. Among the many well known figures who tilled the soil and reaped the harvests of his faith was James Wishard, whose story should not be uninteresting to this later age.

Long and lovingly known as “Father Wishard” in the areas of his activities, James Wishard was born in southern Indiana early enough in the nineteenth century to retain vivid recollections of the earthquake year, 1812. Licensed as a local preacher while quite young, he developed an unusual degree of evangelistic ability; in one such adventure which he delighted to relate, a general Christmas debauch in a neglected community was forestalled by a revival of such power that it became necessary to ask the congregation to withdraw outdoors, to make room for the penitents and their admonisher inside. One of the converts of that night’s labor was the Rev. Daniel McIntyre, who spent more than fifty years in the ministry, and who died in Osceola in 1891.

Migrating to Iowa in the territorial epoch of the state, James Wishard located near Birmingham, Van Buren County, from which circuit he was recommended to the annual conference of the Methodist Church in 1849 for ordination. After being duly examined, he was elected by that body to “local” orders, and by the hands of saintly Bishop Edmund S. Janes was ordained a “Deacon in the Church of God.”

Following the frontier westward, a few years later Wishard

took up a claim at the "Head of Platte," on the line between Union and Ringgold counties, where, amidst the strenuous task of making a new farm out of the raw sod, he ministered as he could to the spiritual needs of the settlers. Their rapidly increasing numbers, however, speedily convinced him that the demands of the group for the offices of the church were too great for the time at his command. Hearing of a Quarterly Meeting of the Decatur Mission, to be held at Hopeville, thirty miles to the east, he repaired there to lay the needs of his community before the presiding elder, Rev. John Hayden, of the Fort Des Moines District. The Decatur Mission was itself a new pastoral charge, having been set off the preceding September, 1854, from the Chariton Mission. The new charge was assigned to Rev. David T. Sweem, a young man just admitted on trial, who was allotted \$50 of missionary funds.¹

One must needs read pioneer church history to catch the flavor of those old time quarterly gatherings. At four times a year earnest Christian men and women from all over the far flung circuit assembled, spending the time from Friday evening "at early candle lighting" to Monday noon, listening to able sermons by the presiding elder and visiting ministers, recounting their own religious experiences, participating in the fervid Sunday "Love Feast" and Communion Service. The meeting usually wound up in a warm revival attended by conversions. Not to be overlooked was the enjoyment to be had in the whole-hearted western hospitality never displayed to better advantage than on such occasions. The interest of this tale lies in the "Quarterly Conference" business meeting, in which the local preachers, class leaders, stewards, and trustees of the circuit looked after the temporal interests of the church.

The business session of the Hopeville meeting first met Saturday afternoon, at which time Wishard presented his church certificates and credentials. Since his Deacon's parchments gave him a sacerdotal rank above that of the pastor, who must pass two entire years on trial before ordination, he was re-

¹ That the money was well earned is evident from Rev. Sweem's report to the following Conference: 446 full members of the Church; 100 probationers—new converts; seven Sunday Schools with 229 scholars, while the missionary bread cast upon the waters came back in \$67 of benevolent contributions. See Journals of the Iowa Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church for 1854 and 1855.

ceived both cordially and with due respect. The first meeting was largely taken up with the examination of five young licentiates, candidates for admission on trial to the "Traveling Connection," so called in distinction from the "local" ministry, they were applying for recommendations which they could present to the next Annual Conference.

Think not that this recommendation was a mere perfunctory performance, gratifying youthful ambition to "join Conference"; these plain country people took their ecclesiastical duties seriously, as become those who regarded the ministry as a divine institution and themselves as door keepers thereunto. Any of these boy preachers might be appointed as their own pastor—would they be satisfactory spiritual guides? and if not, had they the right to inflict them upon others? Moreover, should there develop Presiding Elder or Bishop timber from that unseasoned group would their quality reflect honor or reproach upon those who opened to them the gate of opportunity? That all five passed the ordeal successfully may be taken as conclusive evidence of the soundness of their conviction that they were called to preach.

Taking advantage of the postponement of the financial matters due to the absence of some of the stewards who had not yet arrived, James Wishard presented his request that his neighborhood be made a preaching point on the circuit of the assigned preacher; Wishard also expressed the hope that at the next conference the region might, together with the contiguous counties, be made a new circuit of itself. Now the addition of sixty miles to the hundreds already required in reaching twelve Sunday congregations on his four weeks round, with probably as many more on week days or evenings, was no trifling matter for the preacher in charge. An entire new circuit was decidedly something else again. The Presiding Elder probably expressed the belief of many when he said, "I've been through your country, Brother Wishard, and it looks like a mighty poor prospect for making a living there, let alone support a preacher." On his advice the request was negatived. But to salve the disappointment, the petitioner was invited to conduct the 9 o'clock Sunday Love Feast, a

devotional and testimonial service expected to set the spiritual keynote for the whole day's meetings.

But James Wishard's plea was not done with. Came Monday morning and the adjourned Quarterly Conference, when, in response to the question "What has been paid for the support of the ministry this quarter?" the Stewards were expected to present their reports of collections. From our point of view, and indeed their own, the results were pitifully meager. The pastor's quarterly salary claim was \$70 cash, with \$31.25 for table allowance. Not one class met its quota. Don't call it stinginess, for their relatively generous benevolent offering was exceeded by only two charges in the whole district. Money was unavoidably scarce in a region where every pound of farm produce marketed, and every head of live stock sold, must be wagoned or driven to the "River," a week's tedious travel distant, where it brought just exactly what they could get for it. Besides, dollars coming so hardly must be hoarded carefully to pay for their land claims. So it is not strange that most of the payments were in kind; salt meat, chickens, grain, potatoes, dried fruit, homespun cloth, yarn, even raw wool, with scanty tricklings of fractional silver, and "shin-plaster" currency of doubtful parentage.

When all reports were in James Wishard walked up to the Recording Steward's table and laid down a five dollar gold piece as "quarterage for myself and family at the Head of Platte." The effect was electrical. That bit of gold spoke a language all its own, and well understood by those poverty bitten pioneers; not a point on the circuit had sent in that much cash, and before the donor got to his seat a voice cried out, "Elder Hayden, I move a reconsideration of the vote about taking this brother's place into the circuit!" A volley of lusty "ayes" made it unanimous. After a consultation and readjustment of dates and hours of services elsewhere, to allow the two days added ride necessary to reach the "Head of Platte," the pastor on that circuit told Wishard, "you may give out the word when you get home, that, the Lord willing, I will preach at your house a week from next Wednesday night." Thus the Head of Platte was on the Church map.

Heedful of the scriptural command to "Ask Largely," the

local minister from the Platte renewed his petition for a preacher of their own in the new settlement. Again the Presiding Elder demurred: "You can't feed a preacher in that new country; there isn't missionary money enough to take care of a man and his horse, to say nothing of his family, and where could they live?"

"Well, Elder, you've seen what I expect to pay, and the rest will do what they can; we will divide our hominy and hog meat; the prairies are covered with grass he can cut for hay; he can shuck corn for me on the shares to grain his horse and bread his family. There is a cabin on my claim that can be fixed up for them to live in."

The Elder was still skeptical, "But you are from the East where they are used to good preaching, and you wouldn't be satisfied with the kind of preacher that might be sent you."

Wishard was not to be denied, "Elder, send us anybody, and we will be happy, just so he's got religion and can read the Bible and pray with us and help us save our children from going to the devil!"

The Presiding Elder was weakening when he inquired "Would you take one of these young men we had before us on Saturday?"

He got his reply promptly, "Elder Hayden, I never yet held up my hand to recommend a brother for the traveling connection that I wouldn't take his first year myself!"

There was no denying this kind of a petition, "Brother Wishard," the Elder informed him with deep emotion, "Please God, you shall have a preacher next year! Now after the quarterly meeting on the Winterset circuit, the first week in September, I will come your way on my road to Conference at Keokuk. Have some of the brethren in from the points that want preaching and we will plan the circuit to lay before the Bishop." By such steps as these the border of the Kingdom moved another day's journey into the wilderness.

Now for the outcome. Forty years subsequent to these transactions, the writer had as a parishioner a fine old local preacher, Rev. W. C. Williams, who had been a member of Conference several years in early life, and then returned to secular pursuits, retaining his ordination parchments. Find-

ing on my first call at his home that he had preached in Union and Ringgold counties, I mentioned Father Wishard, and related the anecdote as given above.

The old gentleman listened with close attention: "Well, Brother Harvey, you've got that pretty straight; I did not suppose that there was a person living, besides myself, that knew anything about that Hopeville Quarterly Meeting." In reply to my query if he had been there, he said, "I was youngest of the five recommended to the Conference for admission on trial. More than that, when Bishop Simpson read out the appointments, I was assigned to the Union-Ringgold Mission. I held my first service at the Head of Platte, in Brother Wishard's cabin, and he told the people all about how hard work it was to get them a preacher."

"And how did things turn out that year?" I inquired.

"Splendidly! We never went hungry, and I never had to sleep out on the prairies while riding the circuit; there were a lot of conversions, new members kept moving in, and next year the work was divided, with a preacher for each county."²

When we made a verbal survey of his original circuit as it was in that day we found that not counting other denominations there were then fifteen Methodist pastors, with over four thousand parishioners, maintaining a full quota of parsonages and more than thirty church or chapel buildings in the area where only a generation before it was uncertain if even one minister could be furnished with a bare living. The instances have been rare where the investment of one gold piece has produced a larger visible harvest of results, and of those unseen records, the number of men and women strengthened through the intervening years, can only be guessed.

The declining years of this faithful follower of his Lord were clouded by misfortune. Due to the depression of 1870 and the heavy mortgage on his farm imposed by the assumption of a large debt, together with the long lingering illness and subsequent death of his wife, he lost his farm at near eighty

² The Journal of the Conference of 1854 indicates that Mr. Williams received from the Union-Ringgold Mission, as "quarterage" and "table expenses" \$226.90; which with \$100 missionary appropriation made a fairly good living income, at least for those days when twenty-five cents was a good wage for swinging a scythe 12 to 14 hours in the hay-field. He reported a church membership of 215, with 52 probationers as the converts of his revival meetings.

years of age. Alone, penniless, with no relatives to afford him shelter, he had no recourse than to apply for admission to the county home, where he was treated more as an honored guest than as a public charge.

Learning of Wishard's presence in the Home, Rev. P. J. Vollmer of Mt. Ayr secured consent to hold religious services for the residents of the Home. Some time later, the Rev. F. T. Scott; another local preacher, conducted a very successful revival meeting at Side Hill, where the residents of the Home were later transferred; the result was the formation of a society and the erection of a church, which at its dedication was named "Wishard Chapel," in commemoration of the aged pilgrim whose involuntary sojourn amongst the poorest of the land brought forth such abundant spiritual fruit.³

It is a pleasure to add that after two or three years of residence in the County Home, Father Wishard's situation, through the caustic comments of a quite irreligious journalist, became matter of concern to the Methodist Church, resulting in the formation of two groups of Christian gentlemen, located respectively in Mt. Ayr and Corning, who by contributing ten dollars apiece per annum enabled the good old man to pass his remaining days as a paying guest in the home of a worthy couple, intimate friends of the writer, where he heard some of the foregoing reminiscences. Here he quietly fell asleep when past ninety years of age.

It is men and women like these consecrated citizens who are the true wealth of a nation, a state, and a community.

³ In the Creston News-Advertiser, Nov. 16, 1937, was an account of the semi-centennial of the dedication of the Wishard Chapel, on November 14. The Society was described as "an active country Church, and especial strong-hold for young people." The sketch relates that Father Wishard toured the country in a borrowed team and buggy while the church was under construction, going as far as Afton soliciting subscriptions for the enterprise, and succeeding in obtaining a very considerable sum.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.