

THE CIRCUIT RIDERS – GOD’S PONY EXPRESS, WESTERN UNION AND POSTAL SERVICE COMBINED

Following the end of the War for Independence, America was expanding rapidly. Small communities were springing up in what was then the interior. Most Americans were living on farms or in small, often remote villages, lacking preachers or anyone who could provide Bible instruction. In 1795, 95% of



Americans lived in places with populations fewer than 2,500. How were these people to be reached with the Gospel and who would do it? It was the circuit riders who brought the Gospel, Bible teaching, and the equivalent of Sunday school instruction to people in these isolated areas and frontiers.

These preachers on horseback were remarkable men who served a rapidly expanding, spiritually hungry nation, and they forever changed the religious landscape of America. They pursued their calling with incredible unselfishness and devotion. Nearly half of those circuit riders whose deaths are recorded [by the end of the eighteenth century] died before they were thirty years old; about two thirds died before they had spent 12 years in the laborious service. Obviously, they were not traveling these circuits, preaching God's Word, for what Fanny Crosby would call "ease or worldly pleasure."

Typically, a circuit rider was a young, single man, able to work with his hands. For example, Francis Asbury, the most famous of the circuit riders, had been a

blacksmith; many of the others had been schoolteachers, shoemakers, or carpenters. Usually, he was responsible for a predominantly rural circuit, 200 to 500 miles in circumference. *"He was expected to complete this circuit every two to six weeks, with the standard being a four weeks' circuit. His partner, if he had one, usually did not travel with him, but either followed or preceded him on the circuit. Hence, on a four weeks' circuit, the people could expect preaching about every two weeks, but only rarely from a circuit rider on a Sunday. On rural circuits, the itinerants made preaching appointments for nearly every day of the week, sometimes both morning and evening, with only a few days per month allotted for rest, reflection, and letter writing. Circuit riders were urged to preach at 5:00 a.m. in the summer and 6:00 a.m. in the winter."*

In 1799, one preacher rode the Cambridge, NY, circuit, a 500-mile, four-week circuit with up to 63 preaching appointments. Another, taking the Flanders, NJ, circuit estimated that he traveled 4,200 miles, preached 324 times, exhorted 64 times, and held classes for instruction 287 times. In many parts of the new nation, these preachers suddenly seemed to be everywhere. For instance, Calvin and Sallie Hobart moved into a home on the Illinois prairie. She feared that neighbors who drank and gambled would have a dangerous influence on her children, and there was no one to teach them the Bible. Then Levin Green showed up. He was a Methodist circuit-riding preacher. He could barely read, and he murdered the King's English, but, as Sallie's son Chauncey remembered, *"To him, God, eternity, death, the resurrection, the judgment, heaven and hell, were vivid and solemn realities. ... He spoke as if these were actually present, being seen and felt by him."* He brought the Bible and the Gospel into that neighborhood.

Generally, the preacher rose at 4 AM to allow time for travel. Ahead of him were rugged terrain and constant dangers on lonely trails. He might be weary, or burning with fever, but onward he would press.

Circuit riders pushed through such incredibly bad weather that it became a common saying, “*Nobody out but the crows and the Methodists.*” A pioneer preacher in Louisiana wrote, “*Every day I travel I have to swim through creeks or swamps, and I am wet from head to feet, and some days from morning to night I am dripping with water. My horse’s legs are now skinned and rough... and I have rheumatism in all my joints ... what I have suffered in body and mind my pen is not able to communicate to you. But ‘none of these things shall move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy.’*” This was the spirit that conquered the American frontier with the Gospel. They endured these hardships because of love for God, for Christ, and for the souls of men and women.

Lorenzo Dow



Perhaps the most eccentric preacher of all time, Lorenzo Dow, (often called “Crazy Dow”), was born in Coventry, CT, and lived for some time in this home in Montville, CT. In his early years he was one of the first evangelists riding the circuit in eastern Connecticut. Later, he travelled numerous times through the US, from New England to the frontiers of early 1800s America. He also ventured into Canada, once to the West Indies, and he made three voyages to England and Ireland, where he preached to large crowds. It is estimated that

during the 38 years of his public ministry he likely travelled 200,000 miles.

Francis Asbury – Founder and Architect of the American Circuit Riders



Asbury Statue, Washington, DC

President Calvin Coolidge, (30th President of the US) spoke at the unveiling of the Washington, DC, statue of Francis Asbury (October 15, 1924). In the 1920s, the memory of frontier religion was still retained in the American consciousness. The Asbury statue unveiling included a 3-hour ceremony, for which the president was present in its entirety. A military band played hymns, including “Behold the Christian Warrior,” while an honor guard from Ft. Myer stood at attention. The flags of all 13 original American colonies fluttered in the autumn breeze, and a flock of carrier pigeons was released to symbolize peace. More than 5,000 were in the audience. The Coolidge dedication and speech were front page news in the D.C. newspapers. About Asbury, the president said: “***He is entitled to rank as one of the builders of our nation. On the foundation of a religious civilization which he sought to build, our country has enjoyed greater blessing of liberty and prosperity than was ever before the lot of man. These cannot continue if we neglect the work which he did. We cannot depend on the government to do the work of religion. We cannot escape a personal responsibility for our own conduct ... I do not see how anyone could recount the story of this early Bishop without feeling a renewed faith in our own country ...***” Read the entire speech at: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=24170>