

Joshua Griffith: Pioneer Preacher

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When my father, Joshua Griffith, was a child, he was called "Joshie." He never tired of hearing his parents tell of the leave-taking from their Virginia home; of the trip over mountains and through dense forests; of crossing the Ohio and going on to Marietta, where they spent the winter of 1800-1801. Glowing reports of the fertile land of Kentucky lured them to that State, and taking a trail north of the Ohio River they crossed that stream to Limestone (Maysville) Kentucky.

The trip in covered wagon through the sparsely settled state was visualized by "Joshie" as his mother related the experiences crossing creeks, camping by night along the way, driving over hills and rough roads until they reached Shelbyville. At this place, they purchased land. The deed was made out to "William J. Griffith and Wife—to have and to hold." Here my grandparents built a home and other buildings were added. The land was cleared and fenced. After this, came evidence to them that the deed was worthless.

In the meantime, word had come from southern Indiana relatives telling of productive land and pleasant surroundings. The Griffiths, discouraged but ambitious, decided to go thither and wended their way to the Ohio River. They arrived at the home of a Mr. MacIntire, the boatman, on a gray, cold Autumn morning and called to this river-man: "Come and set us across." The response came, "I'm eating breakfast; you'll have to wait." The impatient traveler urged, "I can't wait; I'm in a hurry." To which the boatman retorted, "Then go around." Grandfather waited.

The foregoing conversation took place on the site where Carrollton is now located. However, the crossing was made and in a day or two they arrived at the home of Uncle John Sigmon on Parks Ridge (Switzerland County). Immediate steps were taken to purchase land; which resulted in securing the farm now beautifully located on the Vevay and Moorefield road, six and one half miles from Vevay. This farm was owned by the Griffith heirs for more than one hundred years. The first home was built in time for the family to eat Christmas dinner there in 1817. Each lap of

their travels as told to "Joshie" was as interesting to him as a tale from a child's storybook.

About 1820, a more commodious home was erected. This was two stories high, though of log construction. It was ceiled and weather-boarded. A great stone chimney with double fireplace separated the kitchen and living room, with a hallway on one side and a kennel with an outside door on the other side. The fireplace in the living-room was the largest I have ever seen and the mantle over it the tallest. Even in mature years I was unable to see on top of it when I tip-toed.

There was space on the second floor for three bedrooms; a winding stairway almost fan-shaped ascended from the kitchen. On the turn, these steps were so narrow as to afford only a toe-hold and yet when Susan, the family "hired-girl," was to be married, she marched down the steps arm-in-arm with the husband-to-be. Wainscoting, painted dark green, adorned the living room and downstairs bedroom. All other ceilings and walls were white. Each room had one window of twelve panes, and white ash floors. Conveniently near was the covered well with windlass and old oaken bucket, inviting travelers to quench their thirst. Typical of that time, there were rows of gooseberry and currant bushes, clumps of sage, horseradish and rhubarb—with an abundance of fruit trees. Surrounding the yard was a white picket fence with a stile by the gateway for ladies to ascend in order to mount their horses. This was a home in which many guests were welcomed and fed. Some of them were prosperous, more of them humble. Many were worthy—others perhaps not.

It was in this home that my father, the youngest child of William and Catherine Griffith, was born on December 11, 1823. He was appropriately named Joshua after the Bible leader. From his casual conversations of later years, his children glimpsed a few pictures of his childhood, which proved that girls and boys of that day were not unlike those of the present time.

His God-fearing parents who were of more than ordinary culture adhered strictly to the habit of church attendance and their counsel was respected by their children. However, at a tender age, when the service seemed unduly long one Sunday, "Joshie" suddenly rose and said: "I'm tired and

I'm going home for Nancy is making me some sweetcakes." A few years later when he was allowed to sit with his brothers in the gallery one Sunday, the episode of two little lads trading (exchanging) trousers took place. His mirth was so great that he was demoted to a seat with his parents for many succeeding Sundays.¹

Not at that time, nor for many years thereafter, were Sunday Schools connected with Church. But there was an independent one near the present Todd home, two miles from the Griffith place. "Joshie," about five years of age, with his big brothers, Tom and John, ventured there one Sunday. The trip going was pleastant—with stretches of woodland along the way, birds singing, squirrels darting up before them and above all the sense of a new adventure. How different the return! The sun blazed out and the way seemed long and dreary to the little lad who had so bravely gone over the same road two hours before. "Joshie" began to whimper, which induced Tom to threaten him with a spanking. But John, who was a natural manager of men, said: "No wonder you are tired, 'Joshie,' after this long walk. What you need is a fine horse to ride." Cutting a long, straight sprout, he handed it to the little boy, with the advice, "Ride it, but be careful; he's a fractious animal." "Joshie" bestrode the make-believe horse and in spite of its rearing, balking and plunging, reached home happy and alert.

Other reasons were apparent why Tom was ready with threats of spanking. One was that his little brother would smuggle apples to bed, placing them under his pillow, then when all was silent and Tom was supposed to be asleep, the champing began. The commotion was sufficient to arouse Tom and also his temper.

About all of his childish failings, my father talked freely, but a knowledge of his many kind and unselfish acts had to be learned from others. One vivid mental picture that I formed from his reminiscences has remained with me. A beloved married sister had passed away, and the boy stood at the gate looking sadly after his mother as she rode away to the stricken house. In the distance, a dove was calling and the plaintive notes found lodgement in the little fellow's heart. Even in his last years, the cooing of a dove always

¹ See Ella Porter Griffith, "The Long Run Baptist Church," *Indiana Magazine of History* (Sept., 1935), XXXI, 204-212.

carried Joshua Griffith to that morning long gone by. To-day, more than a hundred years since the death of Aunt Mary, the notes of a dove bring to me the picture of the lad alone with his first grief.

My grandfather, William J. Griffith, never lost an opportunity to encourage and patronize teachers in his community. In the early twenties of the past century a schoolhouse was built on his place. A Mr. Bell of Philadelphia came to take charge, bringing with him his young wife. But the lonely country with its croaking frogs, hooting owls and rasping insects proved too much for the city-nurtured bride, and after one term they returned to their eastern home.

"Joshie" was too young to attend this school but his brothers and sisters were pupils. Others attending were John, Jessie and Joshua Coleman, Hester Parkinson and the children of William Lewis. "Joshie's" first teacher was a Mr. Rouse, who taught in his own home on the farm, afterwards purchased for the Switzerland County Infirmary. The Rouse home was about two and one-half miles south of the Griffith farm. Mr. Griffith went along with his children the first day to blaze a trail.

The schoolroom served a three-fold purpose, for in addition to educational activities it was used as a living and bedroom. "Joshie's" favorite seat was on the foot of the bed. This was not only a restful place, but by turning back the covers it provided a safe cache for his apples and for the picture books which Mr. Rouse loaned him. One day during this period was indelibly stamped on his memory. The teacher had told the children on the previous afternoon that the next day they would see a total eclipse of the sun. "Joshie" was almost too excited to sleep. While he was hastily eating breakfast, his mother said, "You need not go to school today, 'Joshie.'" "Not go to school?" "But I'll have to go to see the eclipse in Mr. Rouse's Hollow." Then it was explained that the darkness would be everywhere and could be seen at home. Moreover, they were afraid the eclipse might overtake him on his way to or from school.

Another teacher of "Joshie's" early years was Dr. Curry, a very intelligent but eccentric gentleman. One day at this school, "Joshie" became sick and complained of stomachache. Dr. Curry gave him some kind words and also a sweet liquid which, whatever its medicinal value, was pleas-

ant to the taste and thereafter there were frequent attacks of the same malady.

Later a schoolhouse was built on the Griffith farm across from the Long Run Baptist Church. "Joshie" with his brothers and sisters attended school there several terms. When this building was abandoned, my grandfather gave the site on which it stood and some adjoining land for a cemetery.

When Joshua grew older he decided to teach. With additional help from brothers and sisters he had become possessed of more than ordinary education. His first examination was to be taken in Madison. One may imagine that he felt a bit of pride as he rode along in the early morning towards that city. And why not, His English was faultless, his knowledge of mathematics unusual, while his penmanship—and this was true even in old age—was like copperplate engraving. His general information was broad and he knew the Scriptures from cover to cover. Such an array of learning from a mere youth might well surprise the examiner. So with thoughts of the fine papers he would hand in, but with a nervous tremor for the new experience, he reached the office of that official and was shown in. "Let me see some of your handwriting," said the examiner. Father wrote his own name on a slip of paper and presented it. "License granted," announced the official. Astonished, but happy, father journeyed home-ward. His teaching experience covered several terms in Switzerland and Jefferson Counties in the eighteen forties and early fifties.

With such devout parents, it is not surprising that the young man's thoughts early turned to the ministry. When about eighteen years of age, he passed an examination given by the deacons, and was ordained at the Milton Baptist Church in Jefferson County. From that time until his passing at the age of eighty-one, he was actively engaged in the ministry, occupying pulpits in Switzerland and Jefferson counties. He also held a few charges in Kentucky. His pastorate at Long Run Church, which his parents had helped to establish and in which he received his early inspiration, lasted more than fifty years.

The marriage of Joshua Griffith to Caroline M. Vernon, daughter of a prominent citizen of Jefferson County, took place in October of 1848. Her interest in church and family life was ever a help and encouragement to her husband.

This companionship lasted fifty-six years—until his death.

Usually the country churches at that time had services only once, or at most twice, monthly affording the minister opportunity for serving two or more churches. In this way, my father acquired a wide acquaintance since he served almost every church in Long Run Association. Nor were his activities limited to Baptists. There was scarcely a family of any creed within a radius of several miles that he did not at some time visit or for whom he did not perform an act of sympathy.

Never was the weather too severe for him to respond to a call for his services. One New Year's Day, January 1, 1864, which was referred to as the coldest in history, father was expected to conduct funeral services for young David Danner (nephew of Mr. and Mrs. Sol Wright) at Ghent. "Surely," mother thought, "he will not venture out to-day." However, father had no other thought than to respond to the wishes of old-time friends and moreover, he planned to walk as this was almost the only way to keep from freezing. The trip was made, the service performed and the round trip of thirteen miles on foot brought him home with frozen ears to serve as a reminder for many years.

One of his long to-be remembered experiences occurred during a flood in the 1880's. He had been called to conduct funeral services for a child in the upper part of the county. With no thought for his own comfort nor for the danger to be incurred in crossing swollen streams, he set forth in the driving rain. At only one place, the old covered bridge over Indian Creek on the Vevay and Moorefield pike, did he pause to question what he should do. The water was well up over the floor of the bridge, which at best, owing to the age of the structure, seemed none too secure. To cross was a risk; yet he made the venture successfully, went on his way and arrived at his destination in good time.

After the services, one of his friends invited him to spend the night at his home. Since he was weary, he consented to do this, agreeing the more readily when he noticed that the rain had ceased and the skies gave signs of clearing. He hoped that "against morning" not only would he be rested, but also that the streams would have had time to run down. His rest, however, was destined to be very short. About ten o'clock, he was aroused by a downpour of rain on the roof

which seemed momentarily to increase in violence. Convinced that if he were able to cross the bridge at all, he must do so before morning, he arose, dressed hastily, and, after calling to his host that he was leaving, fared forth into the night. When he reached the covered bridge and started to cross, he found that it was indeed hazardous. There was no light to be seen and the drumming of the rain on the roof and swirling waters beneath, through which his horse was floundering, might well have daunted a more timid soul. But again he made the crossing—perhaps the last man to cross that antiquated structure—for in the morning a passer-by brought word that the bridge had been floated from its bearings and was so badly damaged that a new bridge was necessary.

Not all of his duties were sad ones, for many sought his services in tying the nuptial knot. The marriage record in Switzerland County alone shows in the neighborhood of 1700 weddings at which he officiated. Beside these there were many from adjoining counties as well as from Kentucky who came to him to be married. There were fifty-two people named McKay for whom he performed the ceremony. He was always pleased when the bride or groom, or both, were children of parents whom he had married years before. In one family, he officiated for three generations.

He was ambitious for his children to make a success of their lives. They were provided with the necessities, comforts and many of the luxuries. Few families had as much money to spend for books, schooling and college courses. Both by example and by precept, his children were taught to respect the rights and the feelings of others.

His home was always a hospitable one. There were those who came bringing their troubles of this world, seeking advice. One of these an elderly widow came often, seasoning her talk with such words and expressions as "replevin" and "garnishee" and "having the law" on certain parties. I remember father talked so calmly and convincingly to her that the court was never needed to settle her difficulties. Others came seeking spiritual comfort and still others were social visitors in our home. Some of these I recall while others have been so vividly described to me that I seem to have known them. "Aunt" Hester Winslow (the title is by courtesy) occupied an important place in

our family life, coming at regular intervals to help my mother. She was redheaded and very Irish; yet she knew exactly what she wanted as my elder brothers and sisters soon found out. Both of my parents had the greatest regard for her and although the children were wont to "speed her departing" it was only to look eagerly forward to her next coming.

One much welcomed guest who came often on Saturday on her way to attend Church-Meeting, was "Aunt" Polly Wright, who in her youth was said to have walked every step of the way with other immigrants from North Carolina to southern Indiana. She never failed to bring something for the children if only a biscuit, a pear or an apple. On one occasion she had a rare gift—a pullet with ten toes. When we sold our old place in 1926, we still had an occasional ten-toed chicken.

Father was very fond of music. Outside of religious music, he liked best "My Old Kentucky Home" and "Annie Laurie," but none of his daughters could sing them to please him as well as could Aunt Liza (mother's sister). The Ogle family, who were all musical, came at times to our home. When they were there, the afternoon was spent in music at which time my father's pleasant baritone voice joined in the singing. Sometimes I used to wonder why it was that he would cry over well loved music—now I think I understand.

Mr. and Mrs. J. L. Thiebaud (pronounced Tabo) were among other visitors to our home. Mr. Thiebaud was a typical French gentleman always immaculately dressed and as I remember, never out without a cane and a rose in his hand. Then there were our neighbors, so much a part of the happiness of our family, Dr. and Mrs. Purdy, who were New England intellectuals. The Doctor was our family physician, and Mrs. Purdy conducted a private school which my older brothers and sisters attended. The Robert Sharps were known for their liberality, for their roof usually sheltered some one less fortunate than themselves. One never had better neighbors. Joseph Clements and family were also neighbors of long standing. Mrs. Clements was set apart from usual women in that, while she was an excellent housewife, she seldom talked about domestic affairs. She was fond of reading and her conversation showed a knowledge

of Emerson, Swedenborg and current literature. In a letter written in her later years to my eldest sister, she said: "Your father and I have been neighbors for more than sixty years and I know of no one that I would rather have for a neighbor in the great Hereafter than him." This, I consider a supreme compliment.

John F. Cotton and his son Perry were frequent visitors at both our town home and at "The Place," as father always called the farm. The elder Cotton, I remember as a little, bent man with shrewd eyes who wore a silk hat, but who addressed our revered mother as "Sis" which made us feel that he was a privileged person. His son, Perry, was a large, dignified man and a power in the community. Father valued the friendship of this man and his son. When together, their conversation took on a political aspect, rather heated on the part of the elder Cotton, who was a Republican, and milder though no less determined on the part of my father, who was a Democrat. Neither one was ever convinced, but each found the views of the other of interest. All these, besides members of my father's Churches, visiting clergymen and others, gave variety to the home life, and their visits were a source of delight to my father and mother.

In speech, my father was always temperate. Simplicity marked his expressions. For example, he would often say of a young man, "He is unassuming;" of some woman, "She has discretion;" of another person, "He works well and is inoffensive," or, "His word is good." To-day, I can recall a man, Joshua Griffith, of whom one could say: "He was kind; he was intelligent; he had sound judgment; and you could trust him." That man I was proud to call "Father."