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Crusade in the Wilderness, 1750-1830

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The eighteenth century European world, noted for its religious apathy and agnosticism, had little spiritual fervor to offer to the Atlantic Coast regions in America, let alone to the frontiers which were rapidly merging into a united front along the Piedmont, soon to be breaking across the mountains into the Great Valley. In like fashion, the spiritual heritage from the established churches along the coast was not of the highest order, and if it had not been for certain revivalist forces rising out of England, Scotland, and perhaps western Europe, the Middle West of America might well have become a region noted for its godlessness as many expected it to become. To the contrary, however, this region to the westward emerged as a community conspicuous for its spiritual foundations, with a moral code almost as puritanical as that of early New England. Why this paradox; whence these foundations? Volumes have been written on this subject within the last thirty years by Professors William W. Sweet, Colin B. Goodykoontz, and others. Maybe a twenty-minute synthesis of their researches on the foundations of the early West can afford some solace and inspiration to our troubled and disillusioned world of today.

The frontier with its freer environment was a laboratory for a religious revivalism which gathering form in the second third of the eighteenth century spread over America in the movement known as the Great Awakening.¹ This evangelism

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¹ Wesley M. Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, North Carolina, 1930); and C. H. Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1920).

which began in the Anglican church in England with such revivalists as George Whitefield and the Wesley brothers, spread to America invading not only the Anglican church in the South but rapidly moving northward to penetrate the Presbyterian church of the Scotch-Irish strongholds and into New England stirring up the Baptists of Rhode Island and the Congregationalists, led by that great intellectual, Jonathan Edwards. The revival which lasted from 1735 to 1745 had a most revolutionary effect upon the nascent Presbyterian church, primarily confined to the newer parts of the middle colonies and already pushing to the southwestward along the Piedmont. While most of the East was to gradually slip back into apathy and secularism, the Presbyterians were to continue their revivalist movement into the newer frontiers, establishing beachheads from which the cross was soon to be carried across the mountains into the West.

The Scotch-Irish, who were religiously more Scotch than Irish, brought their Presbyterian faith with them to America, and since the early years of the century Scotland had aided them with money, Bibles, and even ministers. The Scottish religious and educational heritage cannot be underestimated, for Scotland was perhaps the most literate country of all Europe in the eighteenth century, and this faith like that of the Puritan church of New England required a definite amount of literacy to be understood. These Presbyterians were dire-hearted religious enthusiasts; persecution in the Old World had fired them with a religious freedom and spirit which they were determined above all else to keep aglow in the new. They had been promised religious freedom in Penn's colony, and they expected it elsewhere. As one authority has said: they were stubborn in their insistence on rights—"they kept the Sabbath and everything else they could get their hands on." And another authority observes: the Ulster Presbyterians "made good frontiersmen, but they also stood in need of prayer."²

At the outbreak of Independence the religious stirrings in the back country boded ill for the established order along the coast. In Virginia especially, the established church was faced with the fact that one-half of the population was now composed of dissenters and the Anglican church itself was

² Quoted in Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1939), 75.

stirring with the evangelical Methodist movement, having provided few missionaries of the more orthodox character.³ Some readjustment had been made, but for the Episcopalians it was going to be too little and too late.

One would hardly expect religion to flourish during a great revolution, especially when the prevailing philosophy of that revolution centered around the Lockian natural rights philosophy.⁴ Time does not allow to deal with the movement for separation of church and state or religious freedom, two great landmarks of the War for Independence which were to have tremendous influence upon the development of the country west of the mountains. Indeed the principles of the Revolution, planted and nourished in the New West, were to make that region more republican than the East itself.

But have not these great achievements obscured some significant losses? Many churches, schools, and colleges were destroyed. Many youths who would have become religious leaders fell on the field of battle. Moreover, it must be admitted that two wars within one generation did much to increase apathy and deadness of spirit, already paralyzing the European world. Indeed, the young nation was poorly equipped to bear the cross, let alone to carry it across the mountains to a wilderness region which had been acquired by the Treaty of 1783.

The Confederation period was characterized by a readjustment of religious institutions along national lines. In spite of the new national organizations of the Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians, the East was not able to help to any great degree the vast movements of peoples, many of whom were still moving along the Piedmont while others poured over the mountains into western Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The Land Ordinance of 1785, which encouraged individual and indiscriminate settlement rather than the group settlement of the New England type, was hardly conducive to an effective religious advance. The Ordinance of 1787 and the Federal Constitution were notable in their profession of religious freedom and encouragement of religion, but material aid was notably absent. In

³ Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *The Founding of American Civilization* (3 vols., New York, 1938-1947), II (1942), *The Old South*, 210.

⁴ J. Franklin Jameson, *The American Revolution as a Social Movement* (Princeton, 1926), 132-141; William W. Sweet, *Story of Religions in America* (New York, 1930), 275 ff.

truth, the federal government which began in 1789 could not have been inaugurated under more unfavorable religious conditions—and the French Revolution with its infidelity was just ahead.

In spite of the times, some progress was made. The Methodists seemed to have profited most from adversity. What was the loss to the Episcopalians became the gain of the Methodists, particularly in the Piedmont and across the mountains.⁵ Here in the West the Baptists also grew rapidly.⁶ But it was the Presbyterian effort that was the greatest in this early national period. Even before the Revolution ended, western Pennsylvania had three resident Presbyterian ministers, though there was no church until 1782. In 1781, the synod of New York and Philadelphia erected the presbytery of Redstone, and in 1786 the presbyteries of Transylvania and Kentucky were established.⁷ Academies and colleges were being founded in the Piedmont which sought out the most promising youths and trained them for ministers, though Princeton continued to furnish the bulk of the missionaries—a point which will be given more adequate attention later. In 1793 the presbytery of Ohio was created for the territory west of the Monongahela, and in 1801 the presbytery of Erie was created to the northward.

But regardless of all this religious movement in the wilderness there was still much that was discouraging. The pioneers were spreading out into so many directions at the same time that no church, no matter how well-organized, could ever have kept pace. The reports of observers in the West, nevertheless, were portentous; many places especially on the fringe of settlement were more like the wilderness around them. Even Pittsburgh, the oldest of the trans-montane settlements, did not escape the censure even of persons admittedly sympathetic with a secular way of life. Bishop Francis Asbury said of this frontier town in 1789: "The people were very attentive, but alas! they are far from God, and too near the savages in situations and manners."⁸ In

⁵ Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier*, 104; *Minutes of the Methodist Conference, 1773-1794* (Philadelphia, 1795), 14, 70.

⁶ Sweet, *Story of Religions in America*, 314.

⁷ Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth H. Buck, *The Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1939), 402, 412.

⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 414.

addition to this degrading influence of nature were the infidelity forces of the French Revolution which penetrated to the frontier of America, in fact, finding perhaps more fertile reception in Kentucky than elsewhere. Confusion, apathy, and fear produced a very dark moment, indeed, in the New West but fortunately it was a dark moment before a dawn.

On the heels of these struggling beginnings occurred the Great Revival. This revival centered primarily in Kentucky and the Ohio Valley. Here in this region the frontier had been almost constantly harrassed by Indian raids since the Revolutionary War. Living in daily fear of the Indian had seemingly increased the revivalist religious spirit. The Presbyterian minister, John McMillan, had noted an "outpouring of the spirit," as he described it, in his congregations in western Pennsylvania in 1781, 1795, and 1799.⁹

It was out of this Presbyterian beachhead that the missionary James McGready parted in 1796, headed for new pastures in Logan County, Kentucky. During the next three summers the torch of faith began to lighten up the surrounding countryside; McGready's congregations got larger and larger and a revivalist spirit began to break the bounds into the surrounding territory. A spiritual uplift had begun. This movement similar to that of the Great Awakening has often been called the Second Great Awakening, but generally it is known simply as the Great Revival.¹⁰ The Reverend Barton W. Stone came like many ministers to Logan County to see if what he had heard was true. He saw wondrous things with his own eyes, and returning to his own congregations he determined to stir up a bigger and better fire. Thus at Cane Ridge in August, 1801, Stone organized a camp meeting with twenty thousand people attending, some coming as far away as the Ohio River.

Ere many a month had gone by, the camp meeting had become quite an institution, in fact, one of the significant and enduring religious contributions of this period of history—the precursor of the later chautauqua movement which lasted well into the twentieth century. The night meetings with their great torch lights must have presented an awe-

⁹ Joseph Smith, *Old Redstone* (Philadelphia, 1854), 187-188.

¹⁰ Catherine Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797-1805* (Chicago, 1816); John P. McLean, "The Kentucky Revival and Its Influence on the Miami Valley," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society Publications* (Columbus, 1891-), XII (1903), 281.

inspiring spectacle. Moreover, the taking of the sacraments in public surely provided much inspiration and reassurance for the average backwoodsman, and the general religious tone of the frontier was without doubt considerably improved.

The orthodox or "Old Side" Presbyterians were shocked at much of the Great Revival, and again as sixty years before, old sores were reopened.¹¹ It is not the purpose here to take sides on the controversies stirred up by the revival; perhaps the real issue at stake as stated by a noted church historian was "Whether it was better to allow whole vast areas to remain without the gospel entirely, or to send them sound teachers who loved souls and knew the way of salvation though they did not know either Latin or Greek."¹²

The clash between Eastern orthodoxy and Western liberalism inevitably led to schism. The first disruption concerned the Cumberland Presbyterians of southern Kentucky who set up as a separate church in 1810, and it was not until 1906 that they united again with the Presbyterian Church of America.¹³

A second revolt among the Presbyterians stemmed from about the same general locus and involved some of the same ministers. Having joined with the Springfield group for a while, some other revivalist ministers in 1804 wrote what they called the "last will and testament" of the Springfield presbytery, adopted the name "Christian," and announced henceforth their intention to follow no creed, sectarian or denominational alignment, but rather to take the Bible literally as the basis of their faith and practice.¹⁴ This new group was generally referred to as "Christians," though they were also known as "Stonites" or simply "New Lights."

Contemporary with the Stonite revolt was a third movement which had its origins in western Pennsylvania, a movement led by Thomas and Alexander Campbell, father and son. The arrival in 1809 of Alexander, who had been abroad studying at the University of Glasgow, gave encouragement

¹¹ William W. Sweet, *The Presbyterians, 1783-1840* (New York, 1936), 287; James McDonald Miller, *Genesis of Western Culture in the Upper Ohio Valley, 1800-1825* (Columbus, Ohio, 1938), 120.

¹² Benjamin W. McDonald, *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1888), 58.

¹³ Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier*, 127.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129; also Stone's *Autobiography* quoted in James R. Rogers, *Cane-Ridge Meeting-House* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1910), 165-166.

to what came to be called the Restoration Movement—of going back to the original scriptures for their faith.¹⁵ In 1832, the Stonites and Campbellites, having similar doctrines, and, both united on the idea of restoration, and using commonly the same name of “Christian,” found it desirable to form a union under the name of Disciples of Christ. The Disciples have the distinction of being the only denomination created in the West and by a western environment during the period before 1830.¹⁶

There were many other momentous results stemming from the Great Revival. While its creation of disaffections was particularly noteworthy, nevertheless, its promotion of a union among the Calvinists should also be mentioned. Indeed, it is not surprising to find the Presbyterians and Congregationalists effecting a union in the West in 1807. Many New Englanders themselves openly admitted the inadequacy of their decentralized organization to provide for the westward movement, as already noted, and many felt they had their hands full on the New York and New England frontiers. In the long run the Congregationalists viewed the union as one of mixed blessings, for by the thirties many New Englanders, beginning to go to the West in large numbers, preferred the more democratic government of the Congregational church. The union operated more effectively in the Northwest than in the Southwest.¹⁷

After the War of 1812, the Presbyterians followed the movements of population into the Southwest, perhaps becoming most conspicuous in the churches established in the towns. All and all, the Presbyterian church in the period, 1800 to 1830, for its organization and trained effort, still deserves first place in the contest to subdue the wilderness.

As for other denominational sects, the Great Revival had an immediate effect of uniting the Baptist church, but a long-range effect of almost hopelessly dividing it into seven different groups, all the way from “Soft-Shell” to “Hard-Shell.” Regardless of this fact and also the limitation that they did not have any national organization behind them un-

¹⁵ Miller, *Genesis of Western Culture in the Upper Ohio Valley*, 126; Winfred E. Garrison, *Religion Follows the Frontier: A History of the Disciples of Christ* (New York, 1931), 71-144.

¹⁶ Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier*, 214.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-151; also consult, Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States* (New York, 1894), 318.

til after 1814 when the General Baptist Convention was organized, they grew by leaps and bounds in Kentucky and spread rapidly and effectively into the Old Northwest and the Old Southwest. By 1809, the Baptists ranked next to the Presbyterians in Ohio including sixty congregations and twenty-five hundred members. Soon they had established themselves along with Methodists in an enviable position in Indiana and Illinois.¹⁸

As the Presbyterians pre-empted the western field up until the time of the Great Revival, so the Methodists rose to great heights after the revival and particularly after the War of 1812 as the waves of settlers rushed into the Southwest. In this section the sparse settlements were an ideal field for the Methodist type of organization.¹⁹ The farmers in the countryside thus largely became Methodists or Baptists, while the planters attended the Presbyterian or Episcopalian churches of the town, slow though they might be in founding.²⁰ The churches and colleges came very slowly because of the nature of this itinerant organization and because this denomination emphasized more the business of saving souls than founding schools and colleges.

Lack of time forbids my dealing with the Quakers, the German sects, or with the peculiar sects such as the Shakers, Rappites, or Harmonites. Suffice to say that the frontier offered a free laboratory for many varied religious experiments.

So much for the church movement before 1830. Inextricably bound up with the religious forces was the crusade for education. This paper would not be complete without some serious attention to this force in early Western life. It was the ministers trained at Princeton who became the schoolmasters of the Piedmont and who taught the three R's to the children of the backcountry in order that they might recite their catechism and read their Bible. While

¹⁸ Beverley W. Bond, *The Civilization of the Old Northwest* (New York, 1934), 472-473.

¹⁹ Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier*, 209-210; Sweet, *Story of Religions in America*, 316-320; *idem.*, *Circuit Rider Days in Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1916).

²⁰ Thomas P. Abernethy, *Formative Period in Alabama* (Montgomery, Alabama, 1922); Walter B. Posey, *Development of Methodism in the Old Southwest* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1933); W. W. Gewehr, "Some Factors in the Expansion of Frontier Methodism," *Journal of Religion* (Chicago, 1921-), VIII (1929), 98-120.

Scotland furnished ministers as teachers, nevertheless, the system was soon developed in America of establishing colleges to train ministers, who in turn were expected to establish other colleges, so that each college became a fountainhead of both religion and education for a college farther along the frontier.

The colleges established by Princeton graduates as they spread their faith to the frontier were of such quality and number that the parent school well deserves the title "Mother of Colleges." Of the seven colleges that were established in frontier country in the period before 1800 all but two were Presbyterian—the other two being Congregational in origin were, however, of the same Calvinistic faith.²¹

In the period, 1800 to 1830, the Presbyterian educational advance continued, with most of the effort being concentrated on the West. Nine Presbyterian and other Calvinist colleges were founded on the frontiers of this second early period.²² The only other frontier denominational colleges founded during this entire period of thirty years were St. Louis University (Catholic) and Episcopalian Kenyon College, at Gambier, Ohio. The latter was the result of forces entirely Western in character. Philander Chase, a Dartmouth graduate and converted Congregationalist, was its founder.

Such is the record of those which survived; but there are many others which flourished and then withered and died. The story of Transylvania University in Kentucky which began under Presbyterian auspices but which was at other periods supported by other sects and even by state and other public communities, is perhaps the outstanding example of frontier colleges. Like William and Mary College, it represents the old Virginian culture at its height, with a classical background somewhat modified by the French romantic influences and frontier environment. By 1820 it had risen to such prestige in the country that it was called the "Athens of the West." Southern gentlemen pointed with great pride to this cultural achievement.²³

²¹ Donald G. Tewksbury, *The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War* (New York, 1932), compiled from tables on pp. 31-32.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky* (New York, 1847), 292; Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (Boston, 1826), 67-68.

All in all, the western university movement before 1830 under the lead of the denominational college was a movement in which the West, college for college, actually outnumbered the East. If time allowed, one could also trace the academy or high school movement in the same manner. As you know, many of these academies grew into colleges. Some authorities have contended that the number of colleges and academies led to weakness rather than to strength, but the point is simply that they had to be established in this manner or not at all. The American Education Society in 1823 declared that "The multiplication of Literary Institutions is dreaded by some, as being in their view, unfavorable to the substantial progress of our national literature. But for ourselves we can say that it seems to be no inauspicious omen. We hail it as a token of a spirit in this community that will not rest, till it has brought within the rank of every enterprising youth the means of a liberal education."²⁴

The fact that there was almost a college to every community forming in the West, constituted a contribution in democracy that was highly significant. In 1826 the Reverend Lyman Beecher averred that, "Colleges and schools are truly intellectual manufactories and workshops of the nation, and in their design and results are pre-eminently republican institutions. They break up and diffuse among the people that monopoly of knowledge and mental power which despotic governments accumulate for the purposes of arbitrary rule, and bring to the shelves of the humblest families of the nation a full and fair opportunity of holding competition for the learning, and honor, and wealth, with the ablest and most affluent families . . . giving thus to the nation the select talents and powers of her entire population."²⁵ They were known as "peoples' colleges," and all were open on equal terms to any who would attend. And as President Philip Lindsley of the University of Nashville aptly observed in 1837: "Such institutions scattered over the land, at convenient distances from each other, are better adapted to the

²⁴ *Ninth Annual Report of the American Education Society* (Boston, 1823).

²⁵ Lyman Beecher, "Appeal for Colleges" in his *Plea for the West* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1835), 15.

habits, wants and circumstances of our widely dispersed and comparatively poor population."²⁶

Inasmuch as social and class distinctions were almost nonexistent in the West, the privilege of higher education came to be regarded as a right of all, which was quite a contrast to the select English college and even to the Eastern college to a lesser degree.²⁷ The curriculum too underwent change in the newer environment to the westward. At first, classical and formal, it became modified to meet the needs of the new country. Such subjects as law, politics, medicine, natural sciences, and trade came to challenge the pre-eminence of religion and the classics.

The American college in its western democratic environment became America's pride and glory. What the East could not immediately establish because of tradition, the West could more readily adapt and alter. The denominational college gave to the West a set of moral values which could never have been obtained elsewhere. Likewise, it contributed its fair share along with the church towards a higher, law-abiding type of community than could have otherwise developed. Furthermore, these colleges not only trained the religious leadership of this region, but their graduates also became leaders in the political life of their day. In truth these colleges formed a foundation stone of the first order in the Valley of Democracy.

Thus in conclusion, by 1830, it could not be said that the West was a godless country or a community without a soul, though many New England intellectuals were sorely concerned. The far-flung frontiers with all their lawlessness had offered a great challenge to the forces of civilization, but the moral and religious forces were triumphing to a greater degree than had been expected. It was a crusade of the first order and the names of the saints, many of whom are now forgotten, lie hidden in the accumulating dust of fast-crumbing records. But their contribution was tremendously important. As one authority has said: "It is safe to say that no group of men exerted such a formative influence upon the destiny of the western people as did these."²⁸ Professor

²⁶ LeRoy J. Halsey (ed.), *The Works of Philip Lindsay* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1866), I, 404-405.

²⁷ Tewksbury, *Founding of American Colleges and Universities*, 5.

²⁸ Miller, *Genesis of Western Culture in the Upper Ohio Valley*, 48.

Beverly Bond has asserted that religion was "one of the chief influences that upheld law and order" in the West.²⁹ Professor Ralph L. Rusk has insisted that the force of religion was "the most pervasive cultural influence in the early West."³⁰ Surely, then, the fundamental virtues on which society rests—loyalty, fidelity, honesty, love, and sacrifice—were as common in the West as elsewhere. But what is more significant, "certain desirable social traits, such as hospitality, neighborliness, and generosity, were probably more fully developed there than in the older communities."³¹

Indeed, religion constituted a crusade of the first order in the planting of civilization across the Appalachians.

²⁹ Bond, *Civilization of the Old Northwest*, 463-466.

³⁰ Ralph L. Rusk, *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier* (New York, 1925), 38.

³¹ Miller, *Genesis of Western Culture in the Upper Ohio Valley*, 27-28.