BORDER STATES ON-LINE

Border States: Journal of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association, No. 7 (1989)

THE FRONTIER PREACHER IN THE CLARKSVILLE AREA

Danforth Ross
Clarksville, Tennessee

Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian preachers appeared in the Clarksville area hard upon the heels of the hunters and explorers and traders. Elder Isaac Todevine, a Baptist, came to the Spring Creek area in 1785, and a year later the first Baptist church in Middle Tennessee was formed on the Sulphur Fork of Red River near Port Royal. Circuit riding Methodist ministers showed up about the same time as the Baptists, and in 1791 Clarksville was the last point on Rev. Barnabas McHenry's four week circuit. The Presbyterian Church also had taken a firm hold in Middle Tennessee before the turn of the century.

However, religion was a part of the culture that the settlers brought with them, not their motivation for coming, in contrast to some of America's first settlers -- the Pilgrims, for example. In 1979 Francis Asbury, first Methodist bishop in America, observed that not one settler in a hundred went west "to get religion, but rather to get plenty of good land." Indeed, according to one account in *Picturesque Clarksville*, "Bibles were scarce in the early settlements, and few families owned or even looked into a Bible." Often they were too preoccupied with surviving in the wilderness -- fighting off the Indians, building cabins, clearing land, and scratching out crops -- to have much time for religion.

There was also a criminal element that had left civilization in the East because of trouble with the law. James Ross writes in *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* that there "were many wild, rough characters, as in all new countries, who would drink, gamble, and fight, often for no other reason whatsoever than to show their pluck and muscle." *And Picturesque Clarksville* reports that in its early history the area was "full of horse thieves, robbers, and highwaymen." Established law had barely begun to appear, and men so inclined took the opportunity to run wild. Needless to say, they had not brought their Bibles with them.

The frontier itself, with its wildness, with its abundant game and easy access to hiding places, was a destabilizing influence as well as a challenge to carve out a stable society. It permitted, perhaps encouraged, an "anything goes" attitude. It made the drinking, the wild behavior, the disrespect for religion and established ways hard to control.

The drinking may even have been a necessity. A Montgomery County sheriff back in the 1930s explained to me his notion of why prohibition had not even begun to stop drinking in Montgomery County. "You know, Jack," he said, mixing me up with my brother, "drinking got into people's blood back in frontier days. You know, I don't believe this country could have been settled without liquor."

Even when efforts to control drinking were made, the lawmakers were cautious. Samuel Stout, the first tavern keeper that *Picturesque Clarksville* mentions, obtained a license in 1970 to keep an "ordinary" and "was required to give bond in the sum of 500 pounds for the faithful compliance with certain conditions, 'that he shall not suffer

or permit . . . any person to tipple or drink more than is necessary on the Sabbath day.'" Presumably this meant that a man could get as drunk as he pleased six days a week, but that he had to drink in moderation on the Sabbath. Still a shrewd lawyer might make a case that his drunken client was drinking only what was necessary.

The Methodists considered drinking a sin, but the Baptists, though condemning intoxication, did not in frontier days take a teetotaler position. They did not even say, "Never on Sunday." James Ross writes that after rural services the people would gather in homes near the place of worship for food and relaxation:

> On going into the house all would be invited "to take something." What they called something . . . was commonly old peach or apple brandy and honey. All from the old men and preachers down to the boys would help themselves to some of this. You must not be surprised, for besides the belief that something of this kind was conducive to health, we were every one old Calvinistic Baptists at that time, all of whom are supposed *by nature* to like something good to drink. And temperance societies and everything of that sort were no more dreamed of than railroads, telegraphs, or ocean cables.

Despite their relaxed view of drinking, the frontier Baptists practiced anything but a relaxed religion. As James Ross points out, they were Calvinistic Baptists. They believed in the doctrine of man's hereditary depravity, meaning that "when Adam, who was the whole, sinned, we the parts sinned in him," and like Adam deserved to be punished. They also believed in unconditional election, that the Almighty, "looking down, as it were, upon the generations of men yet unborn, without the least regard to character or conduct had elected or selected on here and another there to be saved and had passed all others by as vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." According to this view, Christ died for the elect only, "and not one of the elect would ever be lost, or one of the non-elect be saved." All the preaching in the world would do the non-elect no good, and nothing in the world would prevent the salvation of the elect, even the most heinous behavior.

Since all men were sinners, the problem was to find out whether one was elect or not. Accordingly, the preachers beseeched sinners "to shun outbreaking sins if possible, such as horse-racing, card-playing, cock-fighting, profanity, drunkenness, and fiddling and dancing especially." These might be signs of non-election. But even the preachers could not be sure they were elected, though James Ross had a sneaking suspicion that they "thought they were after all just a little better than others, and were chosen or elected on that account."

So behavior, the halfway covenant, just might help out. But Calvin posited another way, the only really reliable way, the covenant of *grace*. If a person had an overpowering feeling of the presence of God in him and could convince others that it was there, then he was one of the elect. Unfortunately, the covenant of grace confronted Calvinists with a double-edged problem. On the one hand, some believers simply were not mystically inclined and never had this feeling of the presence of God in them. On the other, even those who did had a devil of a time convincing the skeptical of the validity of their experience.

However, old line Presbyterians and Baptists avoided this problem, continuing to hold to unconditional election, with sinners dangling between a glorious and happy state after death if elect and the fires of hell if not. For many this was a religion suitable to the harshness and loneliness of frontier life. But for others it was not.

To the Methodists, who were influenced by Calvinism but were uncomfortable with unconditional election, it was not. They had a method for inducing the grace experience -- a noisy service in which there was spontaneous response from members of the congregation. Apparently this type of service also had a strong appeal to frontier

people. It gave them an opportunity for letting off steam, for expressing emotion, for getting worked up, and for feeling they had that spark of grace.

The Presbyterians on the frontier, despite the formality of their services, also felt the pull of the emotional religion and in about the year 1799 a great religious revival began in which they and the Methodists played a prominent part. The revival spread like wildfire through Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio, and even extended eastward over the mountains. A similar revival had gripped the New England frontier in the early part of the eighteenth century.

The spark that set the Tennessee-Kentucky revival going may have been ignited at a sacramental meeting at the Old Red River Church at Port Royal. James Ross gives the following account of this meeting, which drew an unusually large crowd considering the thinly settled country:

> Elder John McGee of the Methodist Church and Elders Hoge, McGready, and Rankin of the Presbyterian Church were holding the meeting. Elder Hoge had just preached a powerful sermon, the hearers "riveted in their attention" but remaining silent. He had barely concluded his discourse when the Methodist preacher, Elder McGee, rose in the congregation, singing "Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove."
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> [Elder McGee] had not sung more than one verse when an aged lady, Mrs. Pacely, sitting across the congregation to the left, and Mrs. Clark, also advanced in years, seated to the right, began in rather suppressed but distinct tones, to hold a sort of dialogue with each other, and to reciprocate sentiments of praise and thanksgiving to the Most High, for his grace and redemption. Still the preacher sang on, and the venerable ladies praised God, in louder tones.
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> [Elder Hoge] came down from the pulpit, intending to take the hands of these two happy old sisters, shaking hands, however, as he passed along, with all those within his reach. Suddenly persons began to fall as he passed through the crowd -- some as dead; some piteously crying for mercy; and a few here and there, lifting their voices high, in the praise of the Redeemer. Among the last was Elder McGee, who fell to the floor, and, though shouting praises, was for some time so overpowered as to be unable to rise.
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> [The three Presbyterian ministers] were so surprised and astonished at this apparent confusion in the house of the Lord, that they made their way out of the door, and stood asking each other in whispers, "What is to be done?" Elder Hoge looking in at the door, and seeing all on the floor, praising or praying, said, "We can do nothing. If this be Satan, it will soon come to an end; but if it be of God, our efforts and fears are in vain. I think it is of God, and will join in ascribing glory to his name."
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> [Elder Hoge] walked into the house where the others presently followed. Rapidly those who had fallen to the floor mourning and crying for mercy, arose, two or more at a time, shouting, praise, for the evidences felt in their own souls, of sins forgiven -- for "redeeming grace and undying love." So there remained no more place that day for preaching or administering the supper. From thirty to forty, that evening, professed to be converted.

The Great Revival dominated religion in the rural areas for the next fifteen to twenty years and stimulated increased membership and the formation of new churches. At times the worshippers gathered in encampments and

the meetings went on for several days. Six kinds of bodily agitations were observed at the meetings: 1) the falling exercise, 2) the jerks, 3) the dancing exercise, 4) the barking, 5) the laughing exercise, and 6) the running exercise.

The Presbyterians were never happy with their involvement in the revival, but were overawed by the strange phenomenon. Finally, a Presbyterian minister arose at a great camp-meeting near Paris, Kentucky, and in the "strongest terms denounced what he saw as extravagant and monstrous." After that the great movement more or less fell apart, like Humpty-Dumpty.

Meanwhile the Presbyterian Church had fallen apart itself; rather, it had fallen into two parts. Orthodox Presbyterians held faithful to election and predestination and felt more comfortable in town, where they could practice a formal, restrained religion. Their educated ministers lacked the missionary zeal that appealed to the frontier backwoodsmen and were themselves unhappy with the highly emotional revivals.

However, unorthodox Presbyterians, living on the frontier, greatly increased in number during the revival and demanded the mother church to ordain their ministers. But the church would not do this, since the education of these ministers "was not such as the rules of the church required" and since "they were considered unsound in their faith in regard to Election and Predestination, and altogether too noisy in their meetings and worship."

After much contention, the rebelling members withdrew from the mother church and organized an independent presbytery under the leadership of Elders Finis Ewing, Samuel King, and Samuel McAdoo. The new body was called the Cumberland Presbyterian Church because it was organized in the valley of the Cumberland.

James Ross writes that the "celebrated Gideon Blackburn expressed the sentiments of the old order when he declared that the 'noise and nonsense never converted anybody, or the world would have been converted by thunder long ago.'" The response of the Cumberland Presbyterians was that the educated ministers of the mother church preached dull sermons "to a cold, dead people with few exceptions" and belonged in town, not out in the country where the western breezes blew.

Though they, too, felt the pull of the Great Revival, the Baptists apparently held pretty firmly to their strict belief that election was in the hands of God and that religious excitement was not the road to salvation. James Ross said that it rarely appeared at the Baptist meetings "in the shape of any bodily agitations" and that he had witnessed only one instance of the kind when his father was preaching. On this occasion

> a Miss McFadin was taken with the jerks. . . . I watched her closely and expected to see her fall to the floor every moment. But she did not, and when preaching was over went to her horse, and was helped on it, still jerking. I did not think it possible for her to keep her seat in the saddle, but as far as we could see, she held on, still jerking. The expression of her countenance was both unnatural and unpleasant, altogether unlike the heavenly beauty witnessed by others.

Whether the person experiencing the bodily manifestations appeared overcome with a sense of the glory of divine things or with distress about his miserable estate and condition depended, James thought, on the approach of the preacher. If he was describing "the joys of heaven," the emotional members of the congregation would have blissful looks on their faces. If, on the other hand, he presented a view of "dread and horror," they would groan and tremble. Reuben Ross evidently wasn't preaching a joyous sermon on this particular day.

However, he wasn't an emotional preacher. "No one ever saw him descend from the pulpit, pass through the crowd, shaking their hands, and leading them to the 'mourners' bench' or 'anxious seat.'" He liked

> to see men troubled on account of their sins, repenting of their wickedness and folly, reforming their lives, turning to God, confessing him before men, going down into the baptismal waters, and crowding in the churches, full of deep religious emotions, but free from all noise and confusion -- such was his idea of a religious revival!

When Reuben Ross did part company with the "Hard-Shell" Baptists, as they were called, it was over the doctrine of election. He found it harder and harder to accept the belief that God had elected some to be saved, others to be passed over, "without the least regard to character or conduct." He could not understand how this could be when the sacred writings declare that his tender mercies are over all his works; that 'he is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that fears him and works righteousness is accepted of him.'" In short, Reuben went "Soft-Shell." Behavior counted. We Rosses have been mostly Soft-Shell ever since, some say soft-headed, whatever denomination we happened to belong to, and James Ross didn't belong to any.

Perhaps the saving grace of religion on the frontier was that it brought lonely people together and that the preachers shared their followers' lives and their warmer human qualities. This the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Cumberland Presbyterians did, as did the orthodox Presbyterians to a lesser extent.

The Episcopalians, in contrast, were lost on this frontier. Episcopalians crossed the mountains in driblets and were slow to establish churches, and then in towns. Matthew Yarrell, father-in-law of Reuben Ross and an Episcopalian, brought his prayer book with him but read from it in solitude.

James Ross speaks of the warmth generated at the frontier religious gatherings. He writes:

> In the neighborhood where the meetings were held, all business was suspended, and the most marked attention was given by the audiences, many coming from a distance guided to the place by trees, from which the bark had been chipped off. On these occasions the hospitality of these people knew no limits. You were welcome to all they had, and to see that you enjoyed it and were satisfied with it seemed to afford them the liveliest pleasure. You were sure to have plenty to eat, a big fire to sit by, your horse well cared for, and the best accommodations for sleeping they had.

The frontier preachers were in many ways like the people they preached to. Like them they usually were short on schooling and were often farmers, since they were paid little for preaching, when they were paid at all. Reuben Ross, who had gone to school long enough to learn the three R's and for many years had a library consisting of only the Bible, farmed five days a week and preached two. Needless to say, he was in close touch with his fellow settlers. He lived in the same lonely isolation that they did, cleared t he land, built his cabin, raised his crops. He suffered the same vicissitudes -- lost a farm because the previous owner didn't have legal title to it, had to leave his next farm because of inadequate water, and lost five children during his first years in Tennessee. "In preaching funeral sermons of little children, which he was often called to do," James writes, "he would give expression to many beautiful thoughts calculated to soothe the bitterness of parental grief." He had been there himself.

But there was also something about the frontier itself that contributed to the humanizing of the frontier preacher. Often, to begin with, he had no church to preach in and carried religion right into the settlers' cabins. Or he would preach in almost idyllic rustic surroundings. For his first sermon west of the mountains, Reuben Ross took "his

stand under the branches of a spreading oak, his audience sitting around him on rude seats or on the ground during the service."

> These men also preached from their horses at times and prepared their sermons while on horseback. James Ross relates that his father's rides from one appointment to another through the thinly settled country "were often long and solitary. This was favorable to deep thought and reflection on what he intended to say when he met his audience." "When thus prepared, his discourse would resemble an edifice, sharply defined in clear atmosphere, exact in all its parts and proportions."

At times the idyllic surroundings became challenging, as when Elder Garner McConnico

> had an appointment to preach under some shade trees on the banks of Big Harpeth River. There fell a heavy rain the night before, and when he reached the river it was past fording. Consequently he could not join his congregation. He spoke to them, however, from the opposite bank and told them if they would seat themselves and be quiet they should hear what he had to say. This being done, he raised his voice a little above its usual pitch and preached a fine sermon, every word of which was distinctly heard on the other side, notwithstanding the distance and the dashing of the swollen stream against its banks. Elder Isaac Todevine used to say that "Brother McConnico has a voice like a trumpet."

These preachers had so much in common with their audiences that their "humanness" at times broke through the harshness of their sermons. Once Elder Todevine, who lived in a solitary cabin on the bank of Spring Creek and whose only companions were his horse Snip and his dog Pup, was off preaching on his circuit and had taken Pup with him, as was his custom. Pup was a good-natured, lazy worthless dog, "but none the less beloved by his master on that account." He "used to have a gay time at the big meetings, playing and romping with the other dogs while his master was preaching. The old man was quite uneasy at time for fear he would leave him." On this occasion, "while preaching, he looked out from the window and seeing Pup, as he thought, going off with a stranger, stopped short and requested one of the brethren to please go and bring Pup back, as he feared he might lose him. He then went on with the discourse again."

Another preacher, Elder Craig, while preaching, happening

> to see from a window the limb of a tree that had a crook exactly suitable for the frame of a pack-saddle, stopped immediately, told the audience the discovery that he had made, informed them that he claimed the crooked limb by the right of discovery, and then went on with his sermon. Such crooked limbs were hard to find and highly prized in those days. . . .

They could be used for pack saddles, and the preachers were just as interested in them as anyone else.

The closeness of the preacher to his people came out also in time of peril. In December of 1811 when tremors from the New Madrid earthquake that formed Reelfoot Lake were felt in the Clarksville area, James Ross "heard the rumbling noise and felt the ground shaking" under his feet. In terror he ran from the field where he had gone to get his father's horse, throwing down his bridle, and fleeing to the house.

"About the same time, the neighbors, and many besides, came pouring" into the Ross yard and remained for the

night and all but demanded that Reuben Ross preach to them. They huddled together before the fires they had built and "many knees bent in prayer that, perhaps, never bent in that way before."

On this occasion, Reuben's sermon of encouragement

> led many of those present to repent of their sins, reform their lives, make a profession of religion, and honor the profession they made. Others again who seemed to have started well, faltered by the way, and as the earth became more and more steady, their faith became more and more unsteady. These were called "earthquake Christians," to distinguish them from those who held out faithful to the end.

As might be expected from the humor that flavors this account, there were humorous preachers, and some delighted in practical jokes. Lorenzo Dow, a famous Methodist minister who appeared in the Clarksville area about 1814, once became upset with one of his brother preachers. At the close of every sermon, this preacher

> would give a description of the day of judgment, when at the sound of Gabriel's trumpet, the Son of man would appear in the clouds of heaven, with all his hold angels to judge the quick and the dead, uniformly adding a description of the alarm and terror that would overwhelm the impenitent sinner, but saying what a glorious day it would be for the righteous, of whom he humbly hoped he was one.
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> Lorenzo Dow, becoming disgusted with his repetition, resolved to put a stop to it, and engaged a boy famous for his skill in blowing a trumpet, to climb a tree near the church that night, and when the preacher got the day of judgment and Gabriel's trumpet, how his heart would rejoice that the day of deliverance had come, to blow a loud horrible blast.
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> All worked well, the preacher gave an animated discourse and at its close, as usual, brought in Gabriel and his trumpet. At this the boy came through with such an awful peal from his trumpet that every one's heart died within him, and leaving hat, saddlebags, and umbrella, the preacher cleared the pulpit at one leap, rushed to the door and took to the woods, followed by his terror-stricken hearers. Henceforth the preacher gave Gabriel and his trumpet a wide berth.

To the frontiersman caught between hope of salvation and fear of everlasting hell, the humor of Lorenzo Dow and other preachers like him was reassuring. It was in keeping with the big thing that all these stories bring out: the breaking through of the feeling of isolation that the frontier people experienced. James Ross speaks of "the happiness which those of the same faith felt when they happened to meet in the wilderness." It was, he adds, a happiness "altogether unlike what is felt in densely populated sections at the present day. Their loneliness and isolation caused a thrill of joy at meeting more easily imagined than described." This perhaps was the key to the triumph of frontier religion.

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This web page is maintained by
Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College
400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu