

WHAT CALDWELL'S BOYS DID IN THE CUMBERLAND

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It makes good sense for scholars and teachers in Kentucky and Tennessee to join together in a chapter of the American Studies Association. The border shared by these two states is almost twice as long as that of the six others shared by Kentucky. Both Kentucky and Tennessee share geographical features, ranging from a mountainous east, to rich central basins, to western slopes that join the Mississippi. Because of their long east-west extent, each state enjoys, or suffers from, several quite distinct regions. Thus, on the basis of terrain, economy, and culture, several inter-state regions, such as the Cumberland area, have much more in common than do the people of each state as a whole.

I now want to make a bold and self-serving claim--that citizens of Kentucky and Tennessee have twice, and only twice, exerted a major and distinctive impact upon American culture as a whole. The first impact involved religious leadership, and the great revivals that began in the Cumberland basin in approximately 1797 and after 1800 spread to central Kentucky and to East Tennessee. These revivals peaked in 1801-2, but in some form continued throughout the nineteenth century. Back to those in a minute.

The second major cultural bequest involved the work of a group of poets, essayists, and economic and social critics who gathered at Vanderbilt University from the end of World War I to around 1936. The small poetry review, *The Fugitive*, gave a name to fourteen young men, and one woman, who boldly entered into the creative and critical ferment of the twenties. Of these poets, four remained close friends, and took the leadership in launching what we now know as Southern Agrarianism in 1930 with the publication by twelve authors of *I'll Take My Stand*. The four men involved in both publications included two born in Kentucky-- Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren-- and two born in middle Tennessee--John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson. It is not my purpose here to essay their contributions to literature, to critical theory, or to social criticism. I only note that their seminars and discussions and fraternal escapades occurred in the same border areas of Kentucky and Tennessee as did the revivals that first erupted in 1797.

My claim for these two groups is self-serving, for I have chosen to write books about both the revivalists and the poets. Also, these two books are the only ones I have written in which the principal characters had such a close tie to Kentucky and Tennessee. Finally, more than is usual, these two groups have a direct relationship to my personal biography. I will clarify later my ties to the revivalists, and only note here that as a graduate student at Vanderbilt in 1951 I met Davidson and took two courses with another Agrarian, H.C. Nixon.

My title comes from an article I published in the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. The boys were the five Presbyterian and one Methodist ministers who pastored congregations in Sumner County, Tennessee, and Logan County, Kentucky, by 1800, and whose congregations hosted the joint communion services in which a great revival had its beginning. All had been members of David Caldwell's congregations in Guilford County, North

Carolina, and I am reasonably certain that all had attended Caldwell's famous log-cabin academy. Also one of Caldwell's boys, but in 1801 the pastor at the Cane Ridge meeting House in Bourbon County in central Kentucky, was Barton W. Stone. The brother-in-law of David Caldwell, Thomas Craighead, had earlier come west as the first Presbyterian minister to settle in the Nashville area.

David Caldwell was born in 1725 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. His parents had migrated to Pennsylvania from Ulster, as had thousands of other Scotch-Irish by even 1725, although these migrants made up the first wave of a veritable flood of Scotch-Irish who moved to America by 1776. Perhaps a century earlier, David's progenitors had moved from Scotland to the more inviting plantations of Ulster, probably from County Galloway in the Scottish lowlands, or the area of Scotland closest to northern Ireland. The genealogies of what became at least a dozen prominent but only distantly related Caldwell clans in America are full of clearly apocryphal details. The legend is that the original family came to medieval Scotland from France, and gained the name Caldwell from a cold (cauld) well on an early farm. After 1560, the Caldwells, like almost all lowland Scots, accepted the church reforms led by John Knox, and with this a Presbyterian polity. Soon members of the Scottish Kirk would be generally known as Presbyterians. In so far as they were active in churches, the Scotch-Irish immigrants were virtually all Presbyterians.

Most Ulster immigrants first settled in Pennsylvania as did this branch of the Caldwell family. Some brothers of David remained in Lancaster County until their deaths in the nineteenth century. But new waves of immigrants, and a natural increase in the early families, forced many Scotch-Irish to move further inland, both west and south. Many moved down the Valley of Virginia, there planting dozens of Presbyterian congregations. Others moved down the Piedmont, most often to south-central Virginia or into central North Carolina. It seems clear that kinship and congregational ties held firm, and thus the new settlements often were in effect planned colonies, with kinfolk or friends and at times even their minister moving as a group. Some of the close familial ties stretched back to the neighborhoods in Ulster, and I suspect all the way back to Scotland, or five or six generations before the birth of David Caldwell.

David Caldwell belatedly experienced a religious conversion in the family congregation in Lancaster County, in 1750, age twenty-five. He soon decided to become a minister, even though he also dabbled in medicine and taught schools. To be ordained as a Presbyterian, one had to have a classical education. So David was able to enroll in the new Presbyterian College of New Jersey at Princeton, probably in 1758. He studied under the College president, Samuel Davies, the father of Southern Presbyterianism and an intellectual only slightly less brilliant than his friend and predecessor in this cursed college presidency, Jonathan Edwards. David graduated in 1761, the year of Davies' death. He almost immediately gained a license to preach, and began the often extended apprenticeship that led to ordination. He was ordained in 1765, at the advanced age of forty.

By then, several families from his home congregation had settled along Buffalo Creek, near present Greensboro, North Carolina. David may well have planned, long before his ordination, to become pastor of their new congregations. Upon ordination, he came to North Carolina, proved himself in service to mission congregations, and in 1766 became the permanent pastor of two congregations on the Buffalo. He would serve them almost sixty years, for he lived to be 100. In a pattern that typified almost all Presbyterian ministers of the era, he sought ways of supplementing his limited pastoral salary. He practiced medicine, acquired a large farm, and built his own boarding-type academy. David married the daughter of his former pastor in Pennsylvania, Alexander Craighead, and sister of Thomas Craighead, later the founding pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Nashville. The Craigheads had by then moved to Mecklenburg County, to the present site of Charlotte. One of David's brothers, Alexander, named after their family minister, also moved to the Buffalo, and established a farm next to David's. I

mention all of this to demonstrate the close family and kinship ties that helped determine paths of migration.

David Caldwell's academy became locally famous. Eventually, he would educate over fifty Presbyterian ministers. He taught all his students Latin and Greek, and continued his better students into what then amounted to college-level courses, although his academy never granted degrees. But the education the young men received enabled them to pass rigorous exams before presbyteries, and, with some additional supervised study, meet the high ordination requirements of the now largely Scotch-Irish denomination.

Among the early academy students was one James McGready, whose parents had moved to the Guilford County colony along with David and Alexander Caldwell. Just after the Revolution, McGready moved to near Pittsburgh, and completed college work in a new Presbyterian institution, now Washington and Jefferson College. He was ordained in the Redstone Presbytery of western Pennsylvania, but decided to return to North Carolina in 1787. This was the year a major revival broke out among students at a small Presbyterian college in southern Virginia, Hampden-Sydney. In the next three years, this revival spread among the Presbyterian congregations in both central Virginia and North Carolina, and also to congregations in the great valley of Virginia. Again, as in Scotland and Ulster, the bulk of the affective preaching, and the only large gatherings of people, were in conjunction with the traditional Scottish summer communions. This revival led to the conversion of young men and the commitment of many of them to the ministry. McGready entered enthusiastically into the revival, and proved himself a very gifted preacher, although too moralistic and puritanical for some in his congregation. He frequently preached in chapel to the young boys at the Caldwell Academy, and soon became a tutor to four or five young men just beginning the long journey to a license and then Presbyterian ordination.

By 1790, the new Presbyterian communities in North Carolina had fully matured, and a generation sought better economic opportunities. The pattern of communal mitosis, which had led daughter colonies from Scotland to Ulster, across an ocean to Pennsylvania, and then down to North Carolina, repeated itself once again. Several families, particularly young families, decided to move over the Appalachians to the new Cumberland settlements north of Nashville; others moved either from North Carolina or from the Shenandoah Valley into East Tennessee. Just as after 1760, these migrants established embryonic congregations and begged their former presbyteries to send them ministers. The first colonies to attract numerous former members of Caldwell's congregations clustered in the border counties of Logan and Sumner. The families came because of the excellent land. Very quickly they established farms and communities. The families who settled were reasonably affluent. Even by 1796 this area was populous, no longer a wild frontier.

It was Caldwell's boys, quite appropriately, who first responded to appeals for ministers. James McGready was the older and best established of the second generation of ministers, in fact already famous in North Carolina for the power of his preaching. He decided to move west in 1796, with some indication that he wanted to escape his three scattered congregations in Logan County. McGready, like all the young ministers, was anxious to better himself economically. Entrepreneurial opportunities always mixed with spiritual ones. The other five men that followed him west were just completing their ministerial apprenticeship, most licensed to preach but as yet not ordained. This included two brothers, William and John McGee. John had joined the Methodists, and around 1798 began serving a Methodist circuit in Sumner County. William remained a Presbyterian, and moved to the new Shiloh congregation in Sumner County in 1796. In the same year, John Rankin, another former member of David Caldwell's congregations, moved to another Sumner County congregation. In 1798, William Hodge, a Caldwell student and apprentice under McGready, would take over this pulpit, allowing Rankin to move to a former McGready congregation at Gasper River, in northern Logan County. In 1800, William McAdow, an often sickly young minister, took over McGready's Red River Tennessee congregation in southern Logan County, so close to

the Tennessee border that it had members from both states.

The six wild men of the Cumberland were now all in place.

Barton Stone also came west in 1796, with a new license to preach. He was not Scotch-Irish, and had grown up in an Anglican parish in southern Virginia. But his mother used a legacy to help him get a classical education, and selected Caldwell's academy. While boarding there, he was converted in the 1787 revivals and, with some later doubts, committed himself to the Presbyterian ministry. He preached in east Tennessee in the summer of 1796, then came to visit McGready, where he learned of an open pulpit at Cane Ridge in the bluegrass. He preached there briefly, but only belatedly decided to become its permanent minister in 1798, and he would be ordained. His attachment to that congregation would have enormous significance in American history because of the great communion of 1801, the largest and most influential in American history, and Stone's later role in founding a branch of the Restoration or Christian movement. I can only refer you to my Cane Ridge book for that story.

McGready was a very successful minister in Logan County. He immediately began holding the large summer communions in each of his three scattered congregations. The communion season meant opening services on Friday evening and all-day preaching on Saturday, often from an outdoor shell or what the Scots had always called a tent. On Sunday the visiting ministers all participated in multiple communion services, with communicants taking a seat at tables for each meal. On Monday morning, a thanksgiving service normally ended the communion season, except in periods of great fervor, when the people often chose to remain on the grounds for up to two extra days. Until 1800, host congregations always provided room and board for all the visiting congregations. For parents long separated from earlier North Carolina friends, this was reunion time; for young people, a courting time; for sinners, a converting time.

Beginning in the summer of 1797, these communions, which moved from one congregation to another during the summer months, gradually drew larger and larger crowds. They were marked by increased fervor and by intense physical manifestations, climaxing in 1800 by large numbers of people who fell to the ground in something like a coma. This had happened before, back in Scotland and Ulster, even in the colonies in the 1740s, but few remembered such exercises, as they called them. In the summer of 1800, at least 10 such communions took place in the border area congregations, including one in Nashville. But for several reasons, it would be the ones in Logan County that became famous.

McGready wrote "A Short Narrative of the Revival of Religion in Logan County" in 1801 and sent parts or all of this manuscript to eastern ministers and to two new evangelical journals. It seems that, within the next three years, everyone involved in evangelical Christianity had read McGready's narrative. Its impact is almost unmeasurable, but clearly more influential than any other description of revivals except Jonathan Edwards' *Faithful Narrative* of the Northampton revival of 1734. The just emerging journals gave it a circulation impossible for even Edwards sixty years before. Ministers all over the country read it to congregations, with almost magical effect. Even Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury, when too ill to prepare a sermon, simply read one version of McGready's narrative, and reported that nothing had ever so moved one of his congregations.

McGready was the first to circulate such a description. This later contributed the undeserved claim that he began something called a Second Great Awakening. Yet, had he not written and circulated the narrative, had he not had a sense of the importance of such publicity, the religious history of the United States might have been quite different. I think he was honest in his description of events in Logan County, although one can see the effect of literary conventions. In a sense he placed himself much more in the center of events in the Cumberland than he deserved.

The narrative led people to refer to the multiple communions as McGready's revival, thus obscuring the role of his colleagues. It also gave an undeserved Logan County stamp to the events, when I believe more of the great communions took place in Sumner than in Logan County. McGready's account also concealed the fact that, by 1800, he had already surrendered two of his three Logan County pulpits to Rankin and McAdow. Not only McGready, but all neighboring ministers, preached at each inter-congregational communion.

What first happened at two 1800 communions, at McAdow's Red River and Rankin's Gasper River congregations, became famous. At Red River, John McGee, the uninhibited Methodist circuit preacher, used late evening exhortations to rouse the congregation into what seemed like unprecedented physical exercises. In the intense emotional atmosphere, several collapsed into a coma. News of this falling at Red River spread like wildfire through the Cumberland, and insured an even larger crowd at the next communion at Gasper River. Spectators were now joining communicants at such events, and were helping shift the focus away from the Sunday communion to what was closer to a protracted revival. The outdoor preaching, from the tent, was often all that non-members or casual observers experienced.

In July, people came from up to one hundred miles to attend the much anticipated Gasper River communion. When the host minister, John Rankin, arrived on Friday afternoon, to prepare for the opening services, he was astonished to find from twenty to thirty wagons, with provisions, encamped on the rising ground above the river and meeting house. These families had, in effect, already established an impromptu camp ground. Camping in or beside wagons was not new; in moving west, families had become expert at this. Something close to camping had occurred in the yards or barns of host families at earlier communions. We have earlier reports of people camping at Baptist association meetings. Yet, this spontaneous camp at Gasper River turned out to be a dramatic new departure in both American religious and recreational history. The on-site families did not want to miss the religious excitement, which often peaked in the night hours. Possibly they wanted to spare local families from a hospitality overload.

News of the camping spread as fast as reports of the physical exercises, which rivaled those at Red River. John Rankin soon took a trip, back through East Tennessee, to the home congregations in Guilford County. He told his story over and over again, both about the exercises and the camping. The story was sufficient, almost everywhere, to create great religious excitement, and as early as 1801 huge communions, or union meetings organized with other denominations, occurred throughout the Carolinas. Camping was a normal part of these meetings. Even as early as 1801 some host congregations began to lay in provisions or mark off grounds for prospective campers. At the great Cane Ridge communion in August of 1801 an estimated 140 wagons, or over 800 people, camped on the grounds.

Thus, in the sense of a major American institution, religious camping began at Gasper River. In the summer of 1989 I twice wandered around the present cow pasture where the first wagons had gathered in 1800. I first came before reading Rankin's hand written account in his brief autobiography now preserved by the Kentucky Museum in Bowling Green, and then came back second time to fit my image to his description. The old Gasper River cemetery alone allows one to identify the exact spot. No historical markers document the significance of what happened there. The present farm owner probably has no awareness of it. In my imagination, the scene came back to life for me, and I was deeply moved. Thus, I placed one of my photographs of that deserted field into my book on Cane Ridge-- the only homage I could offer.

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of camping. Many Presbyterian ministers reacted negatively to the extreme physical exercises, and thus refused to institutionalize what had been spontaneous in 1800 and 1801. Not so the

Methodists and later Cumberland Presbyterians. Even by 1802 local entrepreneurs, or ministers in Methodist circuits, began developing permanent camping sites (well-attended camps brought hundreds of people into a local area, people willing to pay for various provisions or services). Within a decade well-laid-out sites for wagons and tents gave way to rude cabins built by individual families. By 1810, almost all Methodist circuits had camp grounds, and blended their quarterly conferences into planned summer retreats or camp meetings. The practice even spread to Britain, where camping was the reason for a split among English Methodists.

As I argued in my book on Cane Ridge, such planned camping offered evangelical Christians a new type of experience. The camps allowed them to extend the scope, and to blur the boundaries, of distinctively religious activities. It also broadened the range of social contacts, much as group camps today. Instead of the more familial setting of home hospitality, campers confronted something close to an urban neighborhood. They clustered, made up a crowd. And some clearly loved the experience. This deliberate clustering, often in restricted space, became the norm for American camping, in contrast to a lonely wilderness experience. Soon, for rural Americans, living on widely dispersed homesteads, going to camp was literally a way of creating temporary cities, with all the diverse people, the bustle, the excitement, and even the personal anonymity of street life. It involved people in a social environment far removed from their lonely cabins, and allowed them to escape old roles and assume new ones. Add a heady dose of religious ecstasy, and people could literally lose themselves in self-justifying experiences that enabled them to forget, or temporarily transcend, all the strains and problems of everyday life. This meant escape, renewal, recreation, all sanctioned by ostensible religious goals.

Gasper River, even though unplanned, unorganized, and spontaneous, first initiated people into this type of camping experience. Innovative institutions very quickly provided order and continuity for such experience. This led to the camp meeting and to a variety of functionally similar modern substitutes, such as summer youth camps and adult retreat centers. Remove the religious motifs, secularize the goals, and we have present-day campgrounds and resorts, not a few of which actually derive from earlier camp meetings.

The dramatic communions, the hundreds of new converts, provided a sequel to what had happened a generation earlier in Guilford County. Two-score young men, converted in the revival, wanted to go into the ministry. The expansion of congregations led the Kentucky Synod to create a new Cumberland Presbytery in 1802. Within two years it had licensed seventeen young ministers and already ordained two of them. To do so, it followed earlier patterns in its parent presbytery, and relaxed some traditional requirements of Greek and Latin, and out of deference to some doctrinal qualms, it allowed candidates to finesse the Westminster doctrine of double predestination.

Thomas Craighead of Nashville, jealous of the greater wealth and political influence of the ablest of the young ministers, Finis Ewing, protested to the Kentucky Synod. This led to an inquiry, to the refusal of the young ministers to submit to a doctrinal examination, to jurisdictional arguments over the power of local presbyteries, and eventually to the dissolution of the Cumberland Presbytery, suspension of all the young ministers on what were primarily doctrinal grounds, and synodical charges against McGready and his four original colleagues. Appeals to the General Assembly kept the controversy alive until 1810, when the Synod won. McGready and Hodge reluctantly adhered to the old church. A disgusted John Rankin joined the Shakers, and helped create the South Union colony almost in the shadow of the Gasper River church. Ewing, now a powerful figure in these border areas (he helped found a family dynasty along the Red near present Adairville), a close friend and later patronage appointee of Andrew Jackson, led the dissidents who refused to submit. In 1810 he and Samuel King, another of the young ministers,

traveled to Dickson County, Tennessee, to the cabin of McAdow, who was then too ill to preach, and there the three formed an independent presbytery. William McGee soon joined.

In time this lone Cumberland Presbytery expanded into a major new denomination. In polity the Cumberlands remained Presbyterian, in doctrine they developed a fascinating hybrid of Calvinism and Wesleyanism, and in style they were as evangelical as the Methodists, and joined them in developing camp grounds. This main institutional product of the Cumberland revivals remained a mid-sized denomination until a majority of its members merged with the northern Presbyterian Church in 1906. Its major college, before merger, was Cumberland University in Lebanon. The remnant of Cumberland Presbyterians who rejected merger now have only one college, Bethel, in McKenzie, Tennessee.

I end by listing some of my personal ties to the work of Caldwell's boys. I grew up in a Cumberland Presbyterian congregation in East Tennessee. I was born on a farm formerly owned by Thomas Caldwell, a nephew of David. David's brother, Alexander, died as a result of illness contracted as a soldier during the Revolution. In 1795 his widow, and two sons, bought land in the valley where I grew up. The two sons had attended David Caldwell's academy as youngsters, and had been classmates of some of the ministers who came west. In 1796 I am reasonably sure that McGready, McGee, and Barton Stone, on their way to the Cumberland settlements, spent some time with Samuel Caldwell in his new cabin, remnants of which remained when I was a boy, not more than a quarter of a mile from our home, where my mother still lives. I am equally sure that John Rankin stopped there in the fall of 1800 as he carried the exciting news of the Gasper River revival and the new camping back to North Carolina. Samuel Caldwell eventually built a school and a camp meeting site on his land, or what was long known as Caldwell's camp. The green-roofed preaching tent gave an enduring name to our little village--Green Shed. In 1834 a new Cumberland Presbyterian congregation built their first log church on this land, land later donated to the congregation by Samuel's son. The brother of Samuel, Thomas, was one of the first two ruling elders in the congregation. Margaret Caldwell, the sister-in-law of David Caldwell, lived on in Samuel's home until sometime after the census of 1830, preserving until at least then bitter memories of the frantic days when Cornwallis's armies ravaged the Alamance area of North Carolina and even burned David Caldwell's library. Samuel, who died in 1841, has the oldest readable tombstone in our church cemetery. Twice, in the last twelve years, the descendants of Samuel and Thomas Caldwell have held reunions at this church, with my mother filling baskets of food for the dinner on the ground. Finally, as a boy, in my family church, I heard over and over again highly embellished stories about the heroes of our denomination, the now venerable trinity of Ewing, King, and McAdow.

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