

## EDITOR'S PREFACE

On behalf of the Historical Society of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church, I am pleased to introduce volume I of THE CHRONICLE. While future issues will contain collections of articles, perhaps united by an annual theme, we have chosen to devote the entire inaugural issue to the printing of the journal of Peggy Dow. This remarkable work is the story of the early days of Methodism and circuit-riding from the viewpoint of the wife of one of America's most colorful and controversial frontier evangelists. Long out-of-print, the story is here retold for the first time using Peggy's own words - but with modern sentence structure and punctuation, and with appropriate explanatory notes. The retelling of this story will be both a service to all of United Methodism and a standard for future volumes of THE CHRONICLE.

## INTRODUCTION

Although frequently overlooked by history's spotlight, women have played a role in the development of American Methodism that cannot be denied. It was at the insistence of his cousin Barbara Heck, for example, that Philip Embury established America's oldest continuous Methodist congregation, New York City's John Street Church, in 1766. A Methodist lay preacher in his native Ireland, Embury had come to New York with Heck and a few others in 1760 and had drifted into spiritual inactivity. One day Barbara Heck came across her brother and some others playing cards and gambling. Condemning their evil ways, she threw the cards into the fire and rushed to her cousin's house crying, "Brother Embury, you must preach to us or we will all go to hell, and God will require our blood at your hands" [Luccock and Hutchinson, p. 145].

Peggy Holcomb Dow stands as another of those women used of God behind the scenes to support and encourage the men He chose to preach the gospel. Not a physically strong woman, she succumbed to the rigors of circuit-riding within fifteen years of her marriage to Lorenzo Dow. Like her husband, she kept a journal of their work and travels. Since most circuit-riders were single, and certainly none other was so frequently accompanied by his wife, the journal of Peggy Dow is unique among all the documents preserved from those frontier days.

Peggy's husband Lorenzo was born in Coventry, Connecticut, in 1777. Few were neutral about Lorenzo Dow. He struck people, depending on their orientation, as either "Crazy Dow" (a widely-used monicker) or "an original genius of unquestioned piety" [Drinkhouse, p. 132]. When he applied for ordination in the New England Conference in 1796, "the discerning eye of Asbury perceived the peculiarity of his character, and his application was declined" [Stevens, p. 357].

Dow's reapplication the following year also met with opposition. When some of the preachers plead on his behalf until they were overcome with tears, Lorenzo was allowed to travel under the direction of the presiding elder (i.e., district superintendent), but not enrolled as an itinerant. Finally accepted by the Conference of 1798, he proved to be a tireless, though unique, preacher of the gospel and revival generally swept across the circuits to which he was assigned.

Eventually, Dow proved too independent for Methodism and was dropped from its rolls. It was then, when he began to ride

his own self-appointed and spirit-led circuits, that Lorenzo Dow found his real calling. With the growth and development of the camp-meeting, his influence and reputation grew. In 1807 Dow introduced the camp-meeting to England, where the Methodist Church proclaimed: "It is our judgement, that even supposing such meetings to be allowed in America, they are highly improper in England and likely to be productive of considerable mischief; and we disclaim all connection with them"[Acornley, p. 10]. Dow's British supporters were expelled from the Methodist Church there and formed the Primitive Methodist Church, a denomination existing to this day.

Controversial wherever he went, Dow was also a promoter of women preachers, the rights of Negroes and Indians, his own patent medicines, anti-Catholic and anti-Calvinistic rhetoric, and anything else he felt called to. The histories of several Central Pennsylvania Conference communities and churches include references to visits by the (in)famous Lorenzo Dow. At his death in 1834, "he was probably the most widely travelled man in America, and certainly the most widely known" [Sellers, p. 3].

Original nineteenth century printings of Peggy's journal, typically as an appendix to the works of Lorenzo, are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. The text that follows has been taken from Lorenzo Dow's Complete Works (two volumes in one) published in New York by Nafis and Cornish in 1849. It is our prayer that this edited and annotated republication of the journal of Peggy Holcomb Dow will encourage each of us to realize anew the faithfulness of God and the sacrifices of our spiritual mothers and fathers that we so often take for granted.

#### References

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