

TWO ANECDOTES ON HECKLING

by
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I. HOW A CAMP MEETING HECKLER SUFFERED FOR HIS SINS

It is common knowledge that in many places the early Methodist preachers were despised, ridiculed and persecuted. This was especially true in the earliest days of the camp meeting. How active this enmity was can only be learned from the pens of those who were attacked and opposed. One such man was the Rev. Joseph Carson, who came to the assistance of the Rev. Christopher Frye in 1805. In that year, the Rev. Anning Owen was presiding elder of the Northumberland District, and Christopher Frye and James Saunders were preachers on the Northumberland Circuit. The adjoining circuit to the east and north was the Wyoming Circuit, where James Paynter was the preacher in charge and young Joseph Carson was his assistant and serving his first appointment as a member on trial of the Baltimore Conference (the "mother conference" which included midstate Pennsylvania before the Central Pennsylvania Conference was formed in 1869).

Carson later went to the Virginia Conference and ultimately cast his lot with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, of which he became one of the most highly respected and beloved ministers. The historian of the Virginia Conference records the following extended passage about him.

Among those received on trial at this [1804] Conference, we find the name of Joseph Carson: a name that to this day fills an honorable place in the rolls of the itinerancy. Although originally admitted in the Baltimore Conference, this pure and excellent man has been so long identified with the Virginia Conference that he merits more than a passing notice in our narrative. It is our good fortune to be able to give an account of Father Carson's early life and Christian experience, kindly furnished by himself at the request of the author.

"My earliest recollection of Methodism in Winchester [his home town] dates back to 1791, when I was but six years old... The first time I ever saw Bishop Asbury he was standing on a table on the green, preaching...

"I well remember the first one [quarterly meeting] I ever attended. It was held at Shepherdstown [West Virginia] in 1800. Seely Bunn was preacher in charge. Daniel Hitt was presiding elder. We were on horseback, and as we approached the town we formed a procession, the ministers being in front, and began to sing; as we rode through the town singing, the people regarded us very curiously...

"In March 1805 the Baltimore Conference sat in Winchester in an upper room of the house of George A. Reid, corner of Picadilly and Braddock Streets... I was admitted on trial with 22 others, of which I am the only survivor. I was appointed to Wyoming Circuit in Pennsylvania. Immediately after the close of the Conference, in company with James Paynter, a man many years my senior, I set out from the home of my youth, without the expectation of returning for at least two years. After thirteen days travel, through mud and marsh, swimming creeks and rivers, we reached the house of Christian Bowman on the West Fork of the Susquehanna River opposite the village of Berwick. Here we were kindly received and found a pleasant home during our stay on the circuit; it was one of our regular preaching places, for be it remembered there was not a Methodist Church on the circuit. Wyoming Circuit then included all of Pennsylvania from the West Fork nearly to the boundary of New York. We had 32 appointments in 28 days, to reach which we traveled 400 miles, crossing eight mountains, and passing through Beech Swamp, fifty miles in length, which abounded in rattlesnakes.

"[There were]... persecutions from Universalists, Hell-Redemptionists, Seventh Day Baptists, Free Will Baptists, Deists, Atheists, and sinners of all classes... Among the wealthy and refined there was very bitter opposition to Methodists, consequently our houses were among the poor, who were scarcely able to supply us with the necessaries of life, to say nothing of comforts... Our food was of the coarsest kind and not the most cleanly.

"During our stay I attended one of Brother Frye's Camp Meetings. The camp ground presented a very different appearance from those of the present day. The tents were not large commodious rooms, but only sheets, blankets, etc., stretched on poles; the seats were logs, stumps, stones or anything we could get. The stand was somewhat after the present style, but there was no altar. The food was of the plainest kind and for the most part cold -- the tables groaned not beneath a sumptuous load. Brothers Frye, Pernell, Wilson and Paynter were there. We met with strong opposition and much persecution; not only threats but stones were hurled at us, but their efforts to harm us were

frustrated in an almost miraculous manner. On the night of the second or third day, a party of rowdies determined to break up the meeting. While brother Pernell was preaching, the rocks came pretty thick and one striking a lamp post cut a gash in it which must have been fatal had it been on a man's head; he barely escaped it by a gesture which he happened to make at the moment.

"I was to exhort after the sermon, and when I arose I told them I supposed it was their intention to make a martyr of some one of use, and I reckoned I could be spared as well as any of my brethren. 'And now,' said I, 'I will stand here five minutes by my watch, and receive all the stones that you will throw.' And drawing my watch from my pocket, I stood with it in my hand. Not a sound was heard, not a stone was thrown; an awful stillness pervaded the ground. At the expiration of five minutes I spoke, 'Will you allow me to deliver one more message?' I then began my exhortation, and before I finished men and women were falling upon their knees all through the congregation. After I was done I told them I would wait five minutes again as at first for there volley of stones, but none came. Brothers Pernell, Wilson and myself then left the stand to talk to the penitents. While thus engaged we observed at a little distance a group of men, and it was proposed that we should all repair to the spot. When we reached the place we found a man kneeling down, who seemed to be weeping and in great distress. Without speaking to any of the group, I turned to the preachers and said, 'Brethren, I have never felt the presence of darkness so sensibly. I feel as if the Devil were here.' 'That is just the way I feel,' said Pernell. 'I think the Devil is here; let us pray,' said Wilson and lifting up his hands to heaven offered this prayer: 'O Lord God! If this man is sincere, convert his soul; if not, give us some proof of his hypocrisy. Amen.'

"Without speaking a word to any of them, we turned and walked off. In a short time a physician was sent for to see this very man. I went with him; we found him stretched on the ground, apparently insensible. The doctor, after feeling his pulse said, 'I can do nothing for him; this is something I know nothing about; his arterial action is good, but he has no muscular action.' About 12 o'clock that night I visited him again and found him in the same condition. About daybreak he received his strength sufficiently to take a piece of chalk from his pocket and write his confession on a board which was nearly as follows: 'We had determined to break up this meeting. But finding we could not scare the preachers by throwing stones at them, we concluded to have some fun. I was to be the mourner. _____ was to pray for me. _____ was to exhort. I was to get converted and to

raise a Methodist shout. But just at that moment my speech and strength left me, and I am now in this condition.' He was the next morning borne on a litter to the village of Milton, about three miles distant. The meeting continued nearly a week and about fifty souls were converted. Before leaving the neighborhood, I inquired about the unfortunate man. I was told he could walk, but had never spoken, and that on the counters in the stores, and in different places, he was ever writing his confession.

"Many years afterward in a camp meeting in Rappahannock, I met a lady who had heard this incident from the mouth of her father. He was an eye-witness, and to it he attributed his conversion."

The next year Carson was on the Carlisle Circuit, and he tells of an incident at Shippensburg where an attack was made against Brother Paynter.

As a final note, the historian who wrote Annals of Buffalo Valley writes, "The first Camp Meeting in this part of Pennsylvania was held near Milton, on the Chillisquaque Creek in 1806." While that statement has been many times quoted, the above incident could have happened only in 1805. Furthermore, two other references seem to corroborate the date of the above story.

(1) The Quarterly Conference Stewards' Book of the Northumberland Circuit contains the following notation: "Extra Quarter Meeting held at Milton on July 7 and 8, 1805. Collection \$5.63." Although the first notation of its kind, it is often repeated and always refers to a camp meeting.

(2) According to the Conference News of February 1, 1876, Mrs. William Robbins, the first Methodist of the first Methodist family of Greenwood Church, Columbia County, in whose barn services were held from 1809 for twenty years, testified that she was converted in a camp meeting held where the village of Pottsgrove now stands, in 1805.

II. THE METHODIST PREACHER WHO KILLED A HECKLER

Our Methodist forefathers used to say that there was an unwritten but unchangeable law that no Methodist preacher would be permitted to remain a minister if he ever, for any reason, killed a man. Yet one such minister continued in his profession with the full forgiveness of his people. His story has probably never before been printed. It can never be proved or disproved, but it came to the writer from the lips of a patriarch who remembered sitting, as a boy of six, upon the lap of this minister. The latter was his pastor in the old church in Sunbury in 1866, just a year prior to the death of the Godly preacher.

It was in the days of the early camp meetings. Not infrequently was the preacher the target of rude interference on the part of rowdies who came to the meetings to see what excitement they could stir up. On one occasion, neither the date nor the place of which was revealed, a giant of a preacher was exhorting the people from "the preacher's stand," which was an elevated platform covered over with a bower of saplings and interwoven with green-leaved branches to form a sort of shelter.

To attract attention and to heckle the preacher, one young fellow, bolder than his fellows, climbed onto the top of this bower. While his comrades egged him on, he stuck his booted foot and leg down through the branches nearly directly over the head of tall, robust Rev. John Anderson. After ordinary efforts to get rid of the intruder, the preacher lost all patience and gave one great leap into the air and seized the foot of the culprit. He did not release his hold until the young fellow came crashing through the leafy perch and onto the hard rough floor of the pulpit stand. The crash resulted in the death of the heckler from a broken neck.

Whether this occurred in Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Missouri or Illinois is not known. Records do show that John Anderson, converted in a camp meeting in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, in 1829 at the age of 26, became a member of the Baltimore Conference in 1834. In 1839 he was transferred to the Missouri Conference, but his hatred of slavery would not permit him to remain in a conference which was pro-slavery. As a consequence, he was moved to Illinois and then back to the Baltimore Conference

in 1854. In 1857 he became a member of the East Baltimore Conference, the short-lived precursor of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. In September 1867 he was fatally stricken with sunstroke while walking in the heat to the three appointments at which he preached on Sunbury Circuit.

It should be said that the sympathies of the people were, of course, all with the preacher. His memoir says of him, *"He was eminently a man of the people, cheerful in his disposition, and familiarly friendly in his manner, having a kind word for almost everyone he met. Hence, he seldom, if ever, failed to be a favorite with the masses. Yet his general nature was accompanied by an unflinching deference to principle, which he never surrendered to friendships or circumstance."*

John Anderson was buried in the old Sunbury Cemetery where, years afterwards, his grave was marked by a splendid stone, the gift of a benevolent citizen of the city, not a Methodist. His name appears for a final time in the Conference Journal of 1923, on page 39, in reference to J. Clyde Myton, Notary Public, who rendered legal services at that Harrisburg conference: *"The clerk announced that the Notary serving the Corporation on this occasion was born in the old parsonage of the Sunbury Charge, and is a grandson of the Rev. John Anderson, a Methodist preacher, and at one time on the Sunbury Charge. A vote of appreciation and thanks was tendered Mr. Myton for his services."*