

### Three Stories of Methodist Heroism

THE CHRONICLE typically seeks to present a series of papers on a single theme. In this volume are three short stories of Methodist heroism. Each story is from a different time period, and each portrays a different kind of heroism. While the main characters in each situation are putting themselves in real physical danger in the name of Christ, the similarity ends there. I trust these three brief accounts will challenge us all to examine God's claim on our lives and where He might be leading us today. The articles appear in chronological order, both according to when they occurred and when they were originally written.

*Bishop Asbury's Rock* was written by Adona R. Sick in 1954. It's a story that could be written only by one with the interest, ability and local connections necessary to put all the pieces together. In an age when travel is so comfortable and convenient, it's almost shocking to read this account of Bishop Asbury and Henry Boehm as they struggle to journey over the Genesee Road from Monroeton to Muncy. If the aged bishop and his younger traveling companion experienced this much difficulty traversing an established wagon road, imagine the plight of those circuit riders who were truly blazing their own trails into unknown wildernesses. Asbury and Boehm left the comforts of civilization and willingly put their lives on the line.

*John L. Lenhart, Chaplain of the Cumberland* was written by Charles Berkheimer in 1966. Seeing in the archives the original notes and correspondence of Berkheimer as he pursued this story adds to one's appreciation of both the message and the messenger. In an age when soldiers and chaplains still risk their lives, it's humbling to read this account of the first chaplain to lose his life in the Civil War. John Lenhart left the comforts of home and family and willingly placed himself in harm's way.

*Coach Carl Snavely* was written by Paul Fenchak in 1995. One doesn't converse with Mr. Fenchak long before realizing how much he respects the 1941 stand taken by his fellow athletic Clearfield-countian Carl Snavely. In an age when racial and other prejudices still pervade society, the fifty-eight year old story of this college coach is hauntingly and disturbingly challenging and relevant. Mr. Snavely left the comforts of conformity and willingly risked physical and professional repercussions.

There is a subtle similarity lurking in the background of these three heroic stories. Henry Boehm, John Lenhart and Carl Snavely were all sons of the parsonage. Certainly one does not have to be raised in a clergy home to develop courage and convictions -- in fact, the particular pressures of the ordained ministry often make passing the faith within family a uniquely difficult task. What is clear from these stories is the on-going influence of a godly home.

As you read these stories, ask yourself three questions. What heroic actions God may be calling me to today? Who are the spiritual parents that have given me my courage and convictions? Who are the spiritual children God is entrusting to me?

## **Bishop Asbury's Rock**

by Adona R. Sick<sup>1</sup>, 1954

The Genesee Conference<sup>2</sup> was formed July 20, 1810, in Lyons NY by Bishops Asbury and McKendree in accordance with discretionary authority granted them by the 1808 General Conference. It was while sixty-four year old Bishop Francis Asbury (1745-1816) and his much younger thirty-five year old traveling companion Henry Boehm<sup>3</sup> (1775-1875) were traveling from that historic first conference to Northumberland that they passed through Sullivan County and had an adventure neither was likely to forget. Asbury was riding in a small buggy, while Boehm was on horseback. Part of the journey is described by Rev. Boehm in his *Reminiscences*.

"The first part of our journey was very pleasant. We had the company of Anning Owen<sup>4</sup>, the apostle of Methodism in Wyoming, who was not only good company but a good guide. He went with us to Tioga Point [Athens], and then we parted with him reluctantly. Brother Owen went to Wyoming and we took the route to Northumberland. We soon got lost in the wilderness and needed a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide us. Then a fine gentleman, by the name of Coles,<sup>5</sup> piloted us five miles and helped us out of our difficulty."

One might expect Asbury and Boehm to follow modern US 220 -- up the South Branch of Towanda Creek through New Albany, over the mountain at Laporte, and down Muncy Valley. But there was no early trail there. In those days the route of choice was the Towanda Path (a.k.a. the Genesee Road<sup>6</sup>) -- up Millstone Creek from Powell, over Cahill mountain and through Hugo Corners and Bethel to Lincoln Falls, down Elk Creek to Hillsgrove, up Ogdonia Creek, over the mountain at Huntersville, and to the mouth of Muncy Creek.

"We had been accustomed to muddy roads, rocks, hills, mountains, gulfs, rapids, and dangerous streams, but this route excelled them all for difficulty and danger. We traveled several hours in the rain and gained nine miles. We came to Elder's Inn [Eldredsville], where, though not a very desirable place, we were glad to put up.

"It poured all night. The next morning we proceeded through the solitary woods, that had been the abode of Indians, and where the wild beast still found a home, through deep mud, over huge rocks and lofty hills, down deep gullies, to where two branches of the Elk waters formed a junction. The current being so rapid we thought it not safe to venture over; but we soon perceived that the water was falling, and in about an hour and a half we passed over in safety.

"Of this journey Bishop Asbury makes the following mournful record: *We must needs come to the Northumberland road; it is an awful wilderness. Alas! Read and prayed in the woods. I leave the rest to God. In the last three days and a half we*

*have ridden one hundred and forty miles. What mountains, hills, rocks, roots! Brother Boehm was thrown from the sulky, but providentially not a bone broken.*

"This record needs no comment. It makes me weep when I look back and remember how patiently he suffered. I was suddenly thrown from the sulky and might have been killed, but as the bishop said I was providentially preserved, or I might have found a grave in the wilderness and left the poor infirm old man to have pursued his journey alone.

"The road was so rough that Father Asbury could not ride the sulky; it jolted and hurt him, so he and I exchanged, and he rode my horse and I in his vehicle. If he had been thrown out as I was, he probably would have been killed. No bone of mine was broken, and yet the flesh was torn from my left leg so that I was a cripple for months. I suffered more than if it had been broken. Riding on horseback with that poor leg, no language can describe my suffering.

"We will resume our narrative, for we are not yet out of the woods. When we reached the other side of the stream we fell in with a man by the name of John Bown. [Boehm incorrectly remembers the name as "Brown."] As it was dangerous for us to proceed, Mr. Bown kindly invited us to his cabin. No endangered mariner was ever more glad to get into harbor than we were to find a shelter, for houses in that wilderness were *very few and far between*.

"But the reader must not suppose Mr. Bown's cabin was close at hand, and that all we had to do was to enter it. We had to cross the creek twice, and that with great difficulty and danger, and then tug our way up an exceedingly high mountain in the heart of the wilderness before we reached his cottage. When we arrived there we found he had no wife, nor children, nor housekeeper. He did his own cooking and washing. John Bown was a hermit. He was an Englishman who, for some reason, had chosen this secluded spot where he lived, four miles from any other dwelling. His cabin was pleasant, and he most cheerfully divided his coarse fare with us.

"We felt much at home, and the after part of this day we were employed in reading, meditation, and prayer. We spent the Sabbath very differently from what we had generally done. It was what Mr. Asbury used to call a *dumb Sabbath*. What added to the gloom, it rained all the day and night. By the fall out of the carriage the day before I was more injured than I thought for at first; my left leg was bruised and torn and much inflamed, and I was very lame.

"But onward we must move. So on Monday, July 30, we began to descend the mountain, and our kind friend John Bown accompanied us to the shore of the creek, which we found considerably higher than the day before, being swollen by the rain. As it was dangerous to attempt to cross, we took the back track, our host inviting us to return to his cabin and stay until it was safe to proceed on our journey. He did everything he could to make us comfortable and happy. I have put up in palaces, but never felt more comfortable and grateful than in the humble cabin of

John Bown.

"As the storm had abated the next morning, we bade a final adieu to our pleasant home in the wilderness and began to descend the mountain; but our kind friend and benefactor would not permit us to go alone. He went with us five miles, in which distance we crossed the waters of the Elk seven times. John Bown's hospitality was worthy of patriarchal times. To us it was a heaven-send, for if we had been obliged to remain at a tavern during that time we stayed with him we should have been bankrupt, for Bishop Asbury and myself had only two dollars. I know, for I carried the purse.

"We grateful hearts we bid adieu to the hermit and proceeded on our perilous journey. After dining at Hill's Inn [Hillsgrove], we crossed the stream, which was full of drift logs. The wheels were taken from our carriage, and they and the body placed in a canoe, in which we also got, and were rowed over by two men, while our horses were obliged to swim across. The stream was swollen and the waters rapid, but fortunately we all reached in safety the other shore; then we had to put on our wheels to get our sulky in order to prepare for our journey.

"I was lame and the bishop feeble. To add to the gloom, clouds gathered over us dark and heavy. It thundered and lighted, and the rain fell in torrents, and when we were over the stream to begin our journey we had to ascend a rough, high, craggy mountain; but as Mr. Asbury wrote, *God brought us in safety to Muncy Creek. [Asbury incorrectly calls this Muddy Creek, although he might be referring to spending the night where Muddy Run empties into the Susquehanna between Watsonstown and Milton.] Deep roads and swollen streams we had enough on our route to Northumberland on Wednesday.*

This account by Henry Boehm agrees with the local version of the story that still casts its halo over the area. On his journey, the tale goes, Bishop Asbury came one afternoon to the ford of Elk Creek, near what is now Lincoln Falls. A flash flood was swirling down the creek, and his horse could not cross.

Late that afternoon John Bown, hunting his cows, found the bishop and took him home to await the subsiding of the flood. The next morning the bishop went out and sat on a rock beside the cabin to view the Pennsylvania hills. That rock became the "Bishop Asbury's Rock."

Plenty of stones have been hauled from the Bown farm through the years, but NOT "Bishop Asbury's Rock." In 1954, the farm is still in the Bown family.<sup>7</sup> Robert Bown and his family are members of the Lincoln Falls Wesleyan Methodist Church.<sup>8</sup> He and some of his sons, fifth and sixth generations from John Bown, are working those same fields. "Bishop Asbury's Rock" is still there.

## Endnotes

1. Adona Sick is the honored dedicatee of this volume of THE CHRONICLE. Although not well-known within the Central PA Conference, she was a native of Sullivan County and a notable daughter of our Conference who went on serve her Lord in remarkable ways in neighboring Wyoming Conference. Refer to page 4 for more information about Miss Sick and the work from which this account was taken.
2. Named for the Genesee river, this 154 year old conference was re-named the Western New York Conference in 1964 to put an end to its constant confusion with the Tennessee Conference. It originally included part of Pennsylvania and most of the work in Canada. Difficulties and tensions during and following the War of 1812 resulted in the 1824 division of the conference that formed the Canada Conference. The Pennsylvania churches, which included the western half of our present Wellsboro District, remained in the Genesee Conference until 1962, when the boundaries of most Pennsylvania conferences were adjusted to follow the state lines.
3. Henry Boehm was the son of Martin Boehm (1725-1812), the Mennonite preacher-evangelist who joined with his German Reformed counterpart Philip William Otterbein to co-found the United Brethren in Christ denomination. Otterbein and Boehm first met in Long's barn in Lancaster county in 1867 and formally organized and became the first bishops of the new denomination at Peter Kemp's home near Frederick MD in 1800. The United Brethren Church joined with the Evangelical Church to form the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) denomination in 1946 and with the Methodists to form the United Methodist Church in 1968. One of only a handful of Methodist preachers able to preach in German, Henry became an itinerant at 25 and did the preaching whenever he and the bishop encountered German-speaking audiences. At Asbury's request he superintended the translation of the 1805 Methodist *Discipline* into German. The administrative and geographic exposure he gained while traveling with Asbury made him a skilled and respected leader, useful to the denomination for many years. He preached several times after his 100th birthday and is buried on Staten Island.
4. Anning Owen came to Wyoming from New England and was a blacksmith by trade. He was one of the courageous men who were defeated and scattered by the overwhelming force of Indians and Loyalists that invaded the Wyoming Valley in 1778 under John Butler. He fired shot after shot until his gun became so hot he could not hold it. He saved himself by hiding among river vines and watching the mangled bodies of his friends and neighbors float down the river. The thought of facing eternity unprepared filled his soul with terror and he gave his heart to God on the spot. He became a changed man, associated with Methodism, and soon began to share his testimony. A class leader, local preacher and ordained deacon in rapid succession, he is considered the Father of Wyoming Valley Methodism. He traveled circuits from 1796 until his health failed in 1813. He died the next year at the age of 63.
5. It's tempting to identify "Coles" with Elisha Cole (1769-1852) or one of his extended family. They moved from Connecticut to the Asylum region about 1775, were forced to vacate the during the war, but later returned to occupy their former property. Elisha became a local preacher, settled in Monroeton about 1810, and is known as the Father of Bradford County Methodism.
6. The Genesee Road was built on the Towanda Path about 1799 and so named because it

was one of the main routes used by emigrants from southern Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia to the rich valley of the Genesee River. At Liberty Hall, north of present Hugo Corners and at the foot of Cahill mountain, it is said that as many as 28 Conestoga wagons spent the night en route to the lush Genesee Valley. This route was about nine miles shorter than the present US 220 between Muncy and Towanda. While the links from Huntersville to Ogdonia Creek and from Hugo Corners to Millstone Creek no longer exist, oral tradition indicates the road was in use into the early twentieth century.

7. In 1998, the farm is still in the Bown family, and the present owner Dallas Bown appears to have inherited the hospitality of his ancestor John. The property is on Conn Road, which extends south from PA 154 about 1 mile west of Lincoln Falls. The rock sits in front of a slight depression that marks the site of the 1810 cabin.

8. The Wesleyan Methodist Church was founded in 1843 by Methodist Episcopal members and preachers wanting the denomination to take a stronger stand against slavery. In 1968 the Wesleyan Methodist and Pilgrim Holiness denominations united to form the Wesleyan Church.



#### Bishop Asbury's Rock

This is a winter 1998 view of the rock on the Bown farm in Sullivan County PA where Bishop Francis Asbury sat and pondered while stranded by high water in the midst of an adventuresome journey from Towanda to Northumberland during the summer of 1810.