

## **What Ever Happened to... Richard Van Valkenburg**

For a researcher trying to determine what happened to persons who left the ministry and/or the local area, perhaps nothing piques the interest more than the phrase “deposed from the ministry.” Such is the case for Richard J. Van Valkenburg, who was admitted on trial at the first annual session of the Wyoming Conference and served under appointment for thirteen years before those ominous words brought to a close his mention in the conference journals. His service record in the Wyoming Conference is as follows.

1852	admitted on trial, Wyoming Conference
1855	ordained deacon
1858	ordained elder
1852-53	Orwell
1853-54	Van Ettenville
1854-55	North Danby
1855-56	Caroline Center
1856-57	Speedville
1857-59	Skinner’s Eddy
1859-61	Rome
1861-63	Montrose
1863-64	Berkshire
1864-65	Hyde Park <sup>1</sup>
1865	“deposed from the ministry” – page 3

While the 1865 conference journal gives no reason for Van Valkenburg being deposed from the ministry, a close reading of the Missionary Report indicates that those statistics were sent in by F.L. Hiller<sup>2</sup> – who had begun the conference year as one of two preachers on Broome circuit and apparently had been moved to Hyde Park during the year. Whether Van Valkenburg was deposed for leaving his post, or left because he had been deposed for some infraction cannot be determined from the journal – and the previous journals give no hints of any difficulties. And so it is now up to the researcher to fill in as much as possible about Van Valkenburg’s early life, the details of his leaving the ministry, and his post-1865 location and career.

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<sup>1</sup> Hyde Park is the western part of Scranton, on the “other” side of the Lackawanna River. This class was formed in 1849, erected their first building in 1860, and was re-named Simpson Methodist Episcopal Church in 1890. The congregation merged into Court Street in 2003, and the building (at 223 N. Main Avenue) was sold to an independent Pentecostal congregation.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Lavers Hiller (1828-1904) could himself be the subject of a “What ever happened to...” article. Born in England, he eventually became a district superintendent and had a brother and a son who were ordained members of the Wyoming Conference – and his daughter married the son of a Wyoming Conference preacher – but he located in 1886 and entered the Presbyterian ministry.

### Early Life and Wyoming Conference Ministry

Richard Jeptha Van Valkenburg was born August 16, 1823 in the village of Schoharie, Schoharie County NY. When he was two years old, the family moved to Owego, Tioga County NY. It was there he grew to manhood. He reportedly read through the entire Bible at the age of 14 and joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1841. On March 1, 1843, he married Miss Cordelia Briggs. The marriage of Rev. and Mrs. Van Valkenburg was blessed with four children: Martha Jane (1844), Alice B. (1846), Galen B. (1847), and Mary E. (1862). His years in the ministry appeared to be quite successful and, endowed with a fine singing voice, he was reportedly known as “the sweet singer of Wyoming.”

One Sunday morning in 1862, when Van Valkenburg was preaching at Montrose, a telegram from Governor Curtin was brought to the pulpit. It was a summons to arms, as it was believed that the Confederates were about to attack Harrisburg. The minister was not slow to respond to the patriotic impulse, and, descending from the pulpit, he raised a company of one hundred and eight men, who elected him as their captain. They went to the front – but after the battle of Antietam in September, they were returned home to be held as a reserve force. The unit was called out again in 1863, and the night before the Battle of Gettysburg they were stationed near Carlisle.

But Richard was not the only Van Valkenburg serving during the Battle of Gettysburg. His younger brother William H. Van Valkenburg was killed on the second day of the battle in the defense of Culp’s Hill on July 2, 1863. Twenty-four year old William left a wife and a two year old son. The body was returned home for burial in the East Newark Cemetery in Tioga County NY.

Deeply affected by the War, Van Valkenburg returned home with his unit and was appointed at the March 1864 annual conference to Hyde Park. Soon afterwards, however, he volunteered<sup>3</sup> and went as chaplain of the pioneer corps,<sup>4</sup> accompanying Sherman on his November 1864 march through Georgia. At this point the rigors of the conflict began to catch up with the 40 year old Van Valkenburg, and for two months he was very ill in the hospital at Atlanta GA. In early 1865 he received an honorable discharge at Nashville TN and returned home to Owego, but was physically unable to accept an appointment. And so Richard Van Valkenburg was “deposed from the ministry” at the March 1865 annual conference – because he was incapacitated by the War and removed from the ministerial ranks, and not because of any infraction. It would appear that the journal could have employed different phraseology.

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<sup>3</sup> This was done, it may be assumed, with the approval and support of the Wyoming Conference, which then moved F.L. Diller to Hyde Park for the remainder of the year.

<sup>4</sup> The pioneer corps was composed of black soldiers who went ahead and prepared the roads and otherwise supported the main army.

### **A New Start in a New State**

Seeking to regain his health, Van Valkenburg moved to Colorado in April 1865 and accepted a job in the mines. Seeing the need for a gospel witness in an area where the saloons outnumbered the churches, he began preaching on his own. In 1867 he was accepted as a supply preacher by the recently formed (1863) Colorado Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He is the founder of the town of Erie CO, which name he provided in appreciation of his New York and Pennsylvania heritage.

One history<sup>5</sup> of the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Methodist Church makes special mention of Van Valkenburg as follows.

In 1869 the Rev. R.J. van Valkenburg, or "Van", was appointed to the Boulder and Valmont circuit. In 1871 the Chicago Colony established the town of Longmont. In that year "Van" preached the first sermon and organized the first Sunday School in the new town. "Van" became a familiar person in the region of both Longmont and Erie for many years. He built the first house in Erie in 1872 and was closely associated with that town thereafter. He was active for many years as local preacher, as State Representative from Weld County (1883), as well as postmaster, Justice of Peace, Mayor, and other activities.

Before proceeding, a paragraph about this interesting pioneer is in order. Van Valkenburg was born in 1823 in New York State. While preaching in Pennsylvania in 1862, he was summoned to serve in the Civil War. He answered the call and fought in the Battle of Gettysburg and was with General Sherman in the Battle of Atlanta and the march through Georgia. His health had been affected, so after his discharge he sought to regain it in Colorado, where he arrived April 1865. He went to work in the mines in Central City, then preached at the church there. In 1869 he removed to the Longmont-Erie area. In 1870 he was the supply for the Burlington Circuit in the vicinity of Longmont. In 1893 one of the important news events in Erie was the celebration of his golden wedding anniversary.

That golden wedding anniversary celebration noteworthy enough to be mentioned in the conference history was more fully described in another publication<sup>6</sup> as follows.

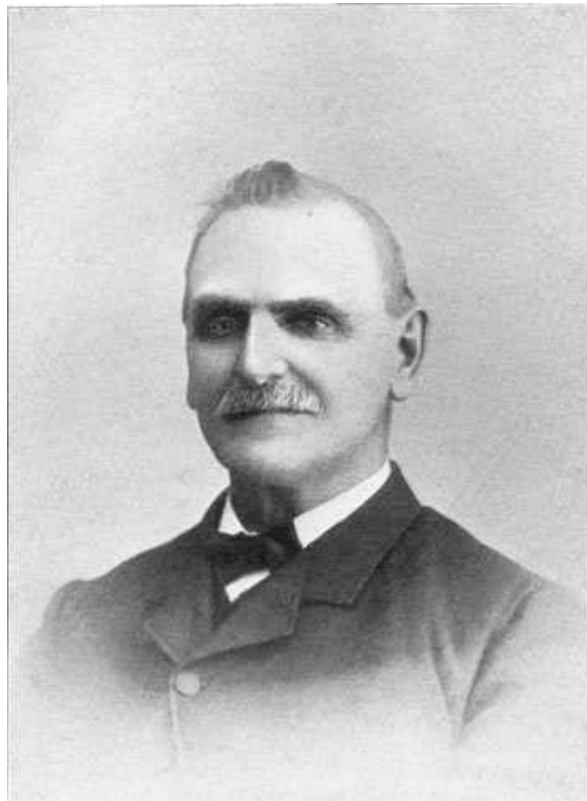
Their golden wedding anniversary celebration was one of the great events of Erie of recent years. Standing so high in the Odd Fellows' society, in particular, the members desired to show their appreciation of their brother and his estimable wife in a manner that would be pleasantly remembered for years. No one of the six hundred guests on that memorable occasion has often enjoyed himself more thoroughly. Guests there were, not only from Erie and immediate vicinity, but from Boulder, Longmont, Lafayette, Greeley, Denver, and many other towns and cities of the state, all here to do

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<sup>5</sup> J. Alton Templin's 1977 *The Methodist, Evangelical and United Brethren Churches in the Rockies, 1850-1976*, pages 219-220.

<sup>6</sup> Chapman Publishing Company's 1898 *Portrait and Biographical Record of Denver and Vicinity*, pages 225-226.

honor to their friend and brother and his charming wife. The spacious halls of the Odd Fellows were thrown open to the public in the afternoon, and soon the rooms were thronged with visitors, about one hundred of whom arrived on a special train from Denver, while many came on other trains and in carriages from their homes in more or less distant places. A banquet was served and a specially prepared program was carried out, to the enjoyment of all. One of the pleasant features of the evening was the presentation of a golden purse with about \$200 in gold from the Odd Fellows' lodges of the state, a beautiful silver water pitcher from the Lafayette Odd Fellows and citizens, and numerous lovely articles of gold and silver. An unusual and beautiful part of the ceremony was the christening of the fourth great-grandchild of the worthy couple by the honored ancestor, Rev. Van Valkenburg.



REV. RICHARD J. VAN VALKENBURG

### **Conclusion**

Because of the prominence achieved by Richard J. Van Valkenburg in Colorado, putting together a rather complete account of his life has not been difficult. He and wife, along with their youngest child Mrs. Mary E. Van Valkenburg Rice, are buried in Denver's Fairmount Cemetery.

But as an example of some of the mis-information in print, even concerning such prominent persons as Van Valkenburg – and as a warning to researchers to

check and their sources, consider the following account of Van Valkenburg taken from a local history.<sup>7</sup>

The Rev. Richard Jephtha Van Valkenburg was born in Erie PA [sic], in 1823 of a very patriotic family. His grandfather fought in the War of 1812. At the age of eighteen, he entered the ministry. When President Lincoln put out his call for men to serve in the Civil War, he read the President's message from his pulpit which resulted in a Company of Volunteers. Later, he distinguished himself as a chaplain in the Union Army. Van Valkenburg married Cordelia Briggs, and they had four children. At the close of the Civil War, he left Pennsylvania seeking a renewal of his health, which had been lost as a result of wounds incurred in the war.

After wandering through Wyoming [sic] and Colorado as a Circuit Minister for a year (He is still known in Wyoming [sic] as the "Sweet Singer of Hymns."), he and Cordelia settled in Erie, Colorado. Within a few months he had organized a Sunday School which met every week in his home. Thus it was in 1867 that the Rev. R. J. Van Valkenburg did more than he realized, for he had organized the beginning of the Methodist Church in Erie, CO, and had made his name immortal in the community.

This minister was also the moving force behind the establishment of the Town of Erie CO, which was named for his place of birth, Erie PA [sic]. He also owned the Erie Hotel. On March 1, 1912, shortly before his death, he and his wife celebrated their 69th wedding anniversary. This was a good example to all of the "thousand and one" couples for whom he had performed marriage ceremonies during his long ministerial career. It is not known what became of his four children, but a grand-daughter later lived in Longmont.



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<sup>7</sup> Erie: Yesterday and Today, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), February 1974. This book was prepared by the Sociology and History classes of Erie High School, under the direction of Karen Adelfang.