Methodist Stories Worth Re-telling

The conference archives houses an amazing collection of published and unpublished stories of the early days of United Methodism within Central Pennsylvania. We have selected two such nineteenth century items to present in this volume dedicated to the re-telling of lesser-known stories.

The first article is taken from the July/August 1890 issue of *The Now and Then*, a publication of the Muncy Historical Society. It was the fourth in a series on “Reminiscences of Old Times on the North and West Branches, or Men and Things Previous to 1850” written for the periodical by Judge Charles D. Eldred. We thank the Society for their permission to reprint the material in this form.

The second article is taken from the October 1879 issue of *The Conference News*, a publication of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It was submitted by Rev. John Amos DeMoyer (1826-1903), then serving in Hollidaysburg. Rev. DeMoyer could have written many stories about Pennsylvania Methodism, as his 52-year ministerial career included 25 different charge assignments in all areas of the conference.

Early Methodism on the Waters of the Loyalsock

by Charles D. Eldred, 1890

Away back in 1820, the inhabitants of the now thickly settled western townships of Sullivan County were few and far between. They had immigrated from various countries and professed various religious creeds. There were no churches within attainable reach, and no mails to transport papers or periodicals. In short, the prospect was extremely dismal and discouraging. But the aggressive spirit of Methodism soon asserted itself. A few earnest members, among whom were Francis Bull and his esteemed consort, undertook the experiment of instituting domiciliary prayer meetings. These were held not only at the houses of the members, but generally without respect to creed or “previous condition.” In fact, they became the rage of the time, and were attended by all classes – old and young, learned and unlearned. Proselytes were soon added, and the foundation laid for what has ever since been the first and leading church of that section.

It happened on one occasion that the weekly prayer meeting was to convene at a house where the family consisted in part of several young men and women – and who were more mischievous than religious, as is often the case. These, intending no irreverence for Methodism, but out of pure love for a
sensation, prepared for exhibition at this meeting a pumpkin ghost. This is made, as every boy knows, by the removal of the inside, the cutting of the figure of a face through the skin on the outside, and the insertion of a light to illuminate the features of his ghostship.

The meeting was well attended, but it happened that no one present, except the audacious young folks in the secret, had ever seen the like before. It is no wonder, therefore, that astonishment bordering on alarm was the result when the improvised ghost made its unheralded appearance. And then it disappeared so suddenly. No one could tell, or cared to trace, where it had gone – but all believed it had some connection with the prayer meeting. After consultation, it was thought best to hold a second prayer meeting at the same house, particularly as the first had been disturbed, and to ascertain whether the apparition would again appear.

The second was more numerously attended than the first, and lo! His ghostship was on time, and assumed a nearer and more threatening aspect. Nothing but the huge log timber of the house, a full foot in diameter, could now have prevailed to prevent a panic. The ghost shunned the front door and stationed itself in front of a window, grinning horribly at those within. At length, being prompted, one of the party – I think it was Hugh Boyle – ventured to address it, exclaiming in a trembling voice, “Poor Ghost, what troubles you?” The answer was promptly returned, “The Methodists – the Methodists.” It then vanished again.

The answer left no doubt on the minds of many who were present that Satan himself in his perambulations “to and fro in the earth” and in walking “up and down in it” had espied the Methodists intrenching upon his hunting ground on the Loyalsock, and had thus materialized to manifest his resentment. I need hardly add that it strengthened the cause and added proselytes to Methodism, and for many years after some of those present on the occasion could not be persuaded that what they saw was nothing else than a veritable ghost, or Old Nick himself.

Not long after this occurrence, but long before they had a church or even a school house to meet in, a minister was sent from the Genesee Conference, who preached semi-monthly to a small audience at the dwelling house of Francis Bull. These meetings were generally at night, and the officiating clergyman’s name was Rev. Parkus. He was no doubt a sincere, good man – but evidently illiterate. Among his peculiarities was the habit of always ending his discourse by the remark, “I have no more.”

As new members were added and the settlement improved, a more local circuit was formed and itinerant preachers sent. They held forth first at the old Quaker School House near Eldredville, and afterwards at the latter place – Charles Mullan, who resided there, having erected at his own expense a larger and

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1 Philetus Parkus entered the Genesee Conference in 1820, was one of two preachers assigned Tioga Circuit 1823-1825, and died in 1826. There is no known obituary for him, and in some Methodist histories he is improperly identified as “Parkhurst” – which was a more common surname.
better building to which was also transferred the Union Sunday School. Mr. Mullan was not a member of the Methodist or any other church – at least at this time – but from a broad philanthropy he provided the much needed building. It proved a rustic college, which graduated young men destined for lawyers, doctors, preachers, merchants, legislators, judges, as well as farmers and merchants.

The first day school taught at the Mullan School House was also the first one opened within Sullivan County, and the teacher’s name was Miss Zilphia Mason – a daughter of Eliphat Mason, Esq., of Monroe Township, Bradford County. She was succeeded the next winter by James Green, an Englishman, and the latter by Nehemiah Ross – who afterwards for some time was clerk to the Lycoming County Commissioners, and whose widow is still living at Williamsport.

It was an approved custom, when religious meeting days interfered with school hours, for the teacher to declare a recess and give the scholars the benefit of the sermon. On one of these occasions, as the audience began to collect for the meeting, the teacher massed his scholars in a corner of the school room, and the vacant seats between them and the pulpit were soon filled by neighbors. The text chosen was the last verse from I Corinthians 13: And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity. Now it happened that among the scholars was a sprightly miss by the name of Faith G., and as the preacher dilated upon the beauty and merits of faith, the youngsters turned their eyes upon the blushing girl as though it were a personal matter.

When warming up with his subject, the minister exclaimed, “Now, my young friends, which of you are willing to have faith?” A mischievous cuss among the scholars, G.I.E., exclaimed sotto voce, “I am, for one, if nobody else wants her.” This caused an explosion among the young folks and an ill-suppressed giggle by the elders. The preacher, supposing that he had inadvertently said something wrong, became embarrassed and confused, and he gave “hope and charity” but a slight consideration. When the meeting was over he asked a brother what mistake he had made which caused the hilarity, and when the matter was explained he enjoyed the joke as much as any one and did not complain.

The formation of a circuit was soon followed by weekly meetings at various places in the Red Shale Valley of Sullivan County, then part of Lycoming County, which was bounded on the north and west by the Burnet Ridge, and on the south and east by the Allegheny Mountain. These places were at the Forks and Hillsgrove, and – at intervals – at the house of John Grange, Sr., near the eastern line of Elkland Township. These were supplemented by quarterly meetings at which Elder Burch\(^2\) of Bradford County officiated. He was a man of

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\(^{2}\) Robert Burch (1778-1855) was born in Ireland, and his family emigrated to Pennsylvania while he was a child. He and his brother Thomas, also a Methodist itinerant, were converted early in life. Robert was a traveling companion of Bishop Asbury and served in the Baltimore and Philadelphia Conferences before transferring to the Genesee Conference. He retired from the active ministry as a district superintendent in 1837 and was living in Bradford County when he died – performing whatever duties his age permitted.
marked ability and earnest zeal, and did much in his time to establish on a solid
basis that respected church.

John Rodgers, of Forks Township, and Samuel Duce, his neighbor,
contributed time and work to the cause. Philip Kilmer and Joseph Hogeland,
living then at the west end of the valley, now Fox Township, did their full part.
Elijah Johnson, the only colored man in the valley, living on Bishop White’s
Ridge, was also an early and earnest member. It took but little over a decade of
years to proselyte most of the inhabitants, and the few who were still outside the
pales of the church were looked upon as aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.

Of these few, some were prejudiced in favor of other creeds, but still there
were a few black sheep who professed no religion at all. Occasionally the
preacher or some pious churchman would visit and remind such persons of their
peril, but it was generally seed sown on barren soil. Among those non-
communicants was an Englishman by the name of H. He was an honest,
industrious and respectable farmer, but he had contracted the bad habit of
swearing. Superfluous adjectives of a profane character would emphasize almost
every sentence he would utter. The habit, like all bad habits, had become so fixed
that he could no longer avoid it.

Hearing of this failing, one of the itinerant preachers – I think his name
was Stocking – conceived it to be his duty to visit Mr. H. and, if the report of his
profanity proved true, to lecture him upon the subject. He did so, and was
surprised to meet an educated gentleman whose conversation was marked by the
strictest propriety of language, and who treated him in the most social and
friendly way. The afternoon passed without a mishap and, supper being over, the
reverend gentleman prepared to return home. Under the impression that his host
was more sinned against than sinning, he proposed to end the visit with family
prayer. H. and his family reverently kneeled down in various parts of the room,
and the minister began his devotions.

As bad luck would have it, George – a lad of eight or ten years –
ensconced himself in the chimney corner and whiled away the time by playing
with the shovel and tongs. Their discordant and ill-timed music provoked the
father very much, but when they both came rattling down together on the hearth
he could bear it no longer. H. exclaimed with much warmth, “G-d d—n it to h—l,
George, can’t you be still while the man prays?” The cat was now out of the bag,
and Brother Stocking bade his host good-bye, a wiser if not better man.

The remarkable spread of Methodism – not only on the waters of the
Loyalsock, but everywhere during the last half century – has also been accom-
panied by a broader and more liberal policy. It is not today what it was in 1830,
at least so far as external appearances are concerned. Sixty years ago the young
members of this church were not allowed to follow the fashions in dress, but were
enjoined to plainness and simplicity in all things. The girls were forbidden to
wear curls on the hair, ribbons and flowers on their dresses, and rings on their
fingers or in the ears. The old or married women had a set style of plain black,
low-crowned, peaked-front bonnets – looking so much alike as eggs. The men
sported ribbon chains to their watches, or linen strings about their necks – if they chanced to possess such a luxury – and eschewed ruffled shirts, then the rage of the dude. Even the minister was disciplined, and bound to respect certain forms of dress. But that cloud has long since lifted, and this aggressive denomination sees no sin at the present day in adorning the person.

Artificial flowers, which were formerly supposed to be articles direct from Satan’s workshop, are now more sensibly looked upon as the handiwork of employed fingers, and emblems of nature’s bounty. In short, Methodism has divested itself of much of its crude superstition and is today a leading liberal church. I may be mistaken in my prediction, but I have always thought that it was destined ere long to be the first in numbers and influence in the United States.

I shall close this article by a reference to an incident which took place about the year 1847. The then editor of the *Lycoming Gazette*, his paper being ultra-Democratic, happened to be at Hillsgrove on a Sunday. Accompanied by an elder brother, who was an uncompromising Whig, he attended a Methodist meeting held in a small school house near the present church. They sat side by side during the discourse, which turned upon the stay-at-home practice of so many people. The preacher said where there was a will there was a way, and it was very wrong to allow trifles to keep religiously inclined persons from attending public worship regularly on Sunday. He said that too many remained at home reading political newspapers to the detriment of their soul’s salvation, that Satan had a mortgage on both the reader and the paper, and that the *Gazette* never went to – or could be read in – heaven. At this rather personal but unwitting remark, all eyes were turned incontinently towards the *Gazette* man. To add to his confusion, his Whig brother nudged him – remarking in an audible tone, “That’s so!”

**Bishop McKendree’s Centre County Accident**

by John A. DeMoyer, 1879

Years ago, soon after its publication, I read in *Early Methodism* by Dr. George Peck the following account of Bishop McKendree fracturing a thigh bone, being laid up for a number of weeks, and left in the care of a German Methodist family. It was originally given at the 1814 the session of the Genesee Conference by George Harmon, presiding elder of the Susquehanna District.

“Bishop McKendree wished me to procure a horse for him, old Gray having seen his best days. I succeeded in getting a very valuable young horse, but he had never been properly broke to the saddle. As I had to accompany the bishop through my district, he wished me to take charge of his young horse and break him. Accordingly we made a pack-horse of my beast and I mounted the
colt. He was a little headstrong at first, but a day’s labor on the road sobered him down so that he became a very pleasant saddle-horse.

“After we had traveled about a week in company, the bishop insisted on mounting the colt. I tried to dissuade him, but it was in vain. He would have his own way, so we exchanged horses. He mounted the colt and seemed pleased with him. We had, however, traveled but a few miles when the colt took fright at the old gentleman’s big white hat, as he took it in his hand, and threw him upon a pile of stones. The bishop received an injury in one of his hips from which he never fully recovered. I immediately went for assistance. I hired a one-horse lumber-wagon, and with a rope made a swing bed, and drove about ten miles to a very convenient place with a good Dutch Methodist family. I remained with him about a week and then left him in the care of the family. This was at the place known as the Warrior’s Mark, in Pennsylvania, between Bellefonte and Pittsburgh.”

The route the bishop was following was a familiar one to me. He followed the trail, which was then only a horse path, down Lycoming Creek. The route continued up the West Branch from the Lycoming, along the Bald Eagle, through the gap to Bellefonte, and past Warrior’s Mark to Bloody Run – through which point passed the road across the Allegheny mountains.

In 1863 my appointment was to the Warrior’s Mark circuit. One day, while enjoying the hospitality of Jacob Gray in Half Moon Valley, I was seated under an apple tree and conversing with Brother Gray on various subjects. The incident I read in Dr. Peck’s book came up, and I related the same. I had no thought of being in the neighborhood where the incident took place – rather inferring from Dr. Peck’s account that the location was somewhere beyond Warrior’s Mark.

“The bishop must have gone somewhere through this region at that time,” I remarked. “I do not know the route from Warrior’s Mark to Bloody Run, but I should like to know just where it happened, and what became of that German Methodist family. The blessing of God was upon those early Methodist families that entertained the itinerants, and I think the kindness shown to the bishop must have been rewarded by the special favor of God.”

Uncle Jacob, as we then and yet call Brother Gray, was standing as I was talking. A silence on his part just then caused me to look up, and I met his eye pleasantly fixed on me. “You would like to know about that accident,” he said, “and the family that took care of him? Well, there are the remains of the house where the bishop lay with a broken limb.” He pointed to a house, the upper story gone and only the lower one remaining, not a hundred yards from where I was seated! The house was halfway between Uncle Jacob’s and Peter B. Gray’s house – by this time I presume entirely gone. Veneration for such old relics prompted me not to touch a single stick towards removal.

“And what of the German Methodist family? Who are they? What has become of them?” These and other such questions were quickly asked as I stood before the old building.
“The German Methodist family was my father’s,” was Uncle Jacob’s quiet reply. He gave me proof of his German descent by addressing me in that, his mother tongue. “My father’s house for a long time was the preaching place of the Methodists,” he continued, until the church up the road at the graveyard was built – and which burned down. My father entertained many of the old itinerants.”

“Tell me now about the accident to the bishop.”

“I cannot from personal knowledge, I was too young. But my brother John L. and uncle Reuben can tell you all about it. John L. was old enough at the time.”

I learned as much as I could of the affair from these parties. The accident occurred when the bishop, with his usual politeness, raised his broad-brimmed white hat to salute a number of men working at repairs on the road. The point where the bishop fell on the stone heap was near a large tree, just a few yards east of where the lane turned off to Uncle Reuben Meek’s house – and a few hundred yards from where the second Gray’s church now stands.

It is not necessary for me to give a history of the Gray family – they are too well known. I may mention, however, the church relation of the family of the old German that took care of the bishop.

John L. Gray, one of the sons, was then my recording steward. He has since joined the host above, and his family as far as I know are all in the church.

Peter B. Gray, another son, had died just before my appointment to that charge – an honored local preacher at the time of his death. Of his sons, One is the head of a benevolent institution in New York state. Another, a member of our Conference, is the honored president of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary. Two other sons were leaders and stewards in the church, and all the other children were in the church.

Jacob Gray, the son who showed me the old house, was a leader and steward and is still living. From his family of eight daughters, five have gone into the itinerancy: the wives of Revs. Samuel Register (Frances) and Presley B. Smith (Anna) of the Baltimore Conference (now ME Church, South), Revs. Alexander McClain Barnitz (Sarah Elizabeth) and Abram M. Creighton (Elmira) of our Conference, and the wife of Rev. Dorsey (Margaret) of the Methodist Protestant Church. All the other members of his family were in the church.

And the daughters of the old German Methodist were equally blessed with children faithful in the church of Christ.

Surely the kindness shown to the old itinerants had not only a blessing on those who performed the same, but the blessing descends on their posterity. At the time of my itinerancy on the Warrior’s Mark circuit, my memorandum shows the names of forty-two by the name of Gray as members and probationers of the church – descendants and kin to the old German Methodist. Besides these, there were scores of other direct descendants through the daughters, as has been noted, that were in the church.
Editor’s Epilogue: The Gray Family

Gray’s United Methodist Church exists today along PA 550, just south of US 322. While the Gray family may have been “too well known” for Rev. DeMoyer to elaborate on in 1879, modern readers may appreciate a few specifics. The family that hosted the bishop was that of Peter Gray junior. Peter Gray senior was a shoemaker who came to the Half Moon Valley (from Frederick County, Maryland) in 1788 with his extended family of married sons and daughters. At first the clan traveled twelve miles to Warrior’s Mark to worship. In 1790, Peter Gray junior opened his home as a regular preaching place and became the first class leader of the Gray’s appointment.

Peter Gray senior, who died in Half Moon Valley in 1817, was the father of four sons and four daughters. In addition to Peter Gray junior, he had the following children.
*Adam Gray
*George Gray – died in 1816 leaving Christian, Sarah, and Mary Ann.
*John Gray – raised a large family that included Mrs. Catherine Stine, Mrs. Polly Mattern, Mrs. Barbara Mattern, Mrs. Susan Blakely, Mrs. Sarah Johnston, Mrs. Hannah McKenney, and Samuel P. Gray. Samuel P. was the father of Rev. George Tarring Gray (1832-1898), who was in turn the father of Rev. Foster M. Gray of the Pittsburgh Conference
*Elizabeth Gray – married Hartsock.
*Eve Gray – married Heiskill.
*Mary Gray – married David Runk, proprietor of the valley’s first blacksmith shop
*daughter Gray – married John Gearhart, a farmer.

The known children of Peter Gray junior (1769-1842) are as follows.
*Jacob Gray – whose 5 daughters that married pastors are listed in the article.
*John L. Gray – died 9/30/1874 at the age of 68, a long-time county official.
*Peter B. Gray – killed instantly 2/3/1862 by falling from the loft of his wagon-shed. He was the father of 11 children, including Dr. John Perdue Gray and Rev. Edward James Gray – each worthy of a separate paragraph.

Dr. John Perdue Gray (1825-1886) received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1845, became assistant superintendent at the New York State Insane Asylum at Utica in 1850, and was promoted to superintendent in 1854 – at only 29 years of age, a position he held until his death. At first he continued the "moral treatment" of patients as established by his predecessors. Gray instituted the systematic recording of case notes, postmortem examinations, and other scientific research at the asylum. In time his ideas regarding the causes of mental illness shifted from a combination of moral weakness and physical illness to physical disturbances exacerbated by inherited predispositions and environmental stresses. Gray’s colleagues acknowledged his contributions to medicine and psychiatry by electing him to the presidency of many professional organizations. As a physician of national reputation, Dr. Gray was the primary
professional in at least two significant cases. In 1859, one of the northerners implicated in the John Brown conspiracy was Gerrit Smith, a wealthy landholder from Peterboro, New York. When the demand for a thorough investigation into the conspiracy behind the Harpers Ferry incident rapidly swelled, Smith was committed by his family to the New York State Insane Asylum at Utica. Gray was charged with determining whether Smith was faking a mental breakdown in order to avoid prosecution, and his notes on the case are of both medical and historical value. In 1881 Dr. Gray was a prominent witness at the trial of Charles Guiteau, assassin of President Garfield.

Rev. Edward James Gray (1832-1905) was admitted to the old East Baltimore Conference in 1859 and served pastorates for 15 years before being elected president of Williamsport Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, in 1874. During his 30-year tenure, Dr. Gray transformed the financially and academically struggling school into a respected institution. His colleagues in the Central PA Conference elected him delegate to six consecutive General Conferences from 1884 to 1904, and he represented American Methodism at international Ecumenical Conferences in 1891 and 1900.

In conclusion, the point of Rev. DeMoyer that there was a special spiritual bond between the early circuit riders and the families that hosted them cannot be over-emphasized. The traveling preachers left behind not only the Spirit of God, but also their own names. Dr. John Perdue Gray was named (with an Anglicized spelling) for Rev. John Perdeu, itinerant on the Huntingdon circuit 1810-11; Rev. George Tarring Gray was named for Rev. Henry Tarring, itinerant on the Huntingdon circuit 1830-32.