

Brother Van

(1848-1919)

Methodist Missionary to Montana

Born in Adams County PA, William Wesley Van Orsdel is best known in Methodism as the courageous circuit rider “Brother Van” who tamed the Montana frontier by fearlessly preaching the gospel in the bars and in the open air, and by establishing Methodist churches and schools and hospitals throughout that future state.

As a fifteen year old boy he was also present at and involved in the Battle of Gettysburg. The best account of that story is found in the first chapter of the 1919 book *Brother Van*, by Stella W. Brummitt. The archives is privileged to have a copy of this relatively rare volume that was personally inscribed by Rev. Van Orsdel (just six months before his death) to his niece Effie May Thomas Staley (1872-1966) in 1919, rescued from her estate sale by Rev. James Herman (1932-2008) in 1966, and presented to the archives (as desired by Rev. Herman) by the Herman family in 2011.

The following section on Brother Van at Gettysburg is taken, with minor editing for continuity, from the first chapter, *A Boy at Gettysburg*, of that book. While the account sounds romantic and embellished, the author is a recognized Methodist writer who personally knew Brother Van – and Brother Van himself had ample opportunity to inspect and/or correct the material. The remaining sections are compiled from the various sources listed in the bibliography.

Brother Van at Gettysburg

There was a dauntlessness in William Wesley Van Orsdel which was due partly to the fact that he had pioneer ancestry. His great-grandfather came over from Holland to New Jersey with the early settlers. His grandfather settled in Pennsylvania about the time of the Revolution, and William’s father was born there. His mother came from England, and in the little farm house near Gettysburg, William was born on March 20, 1848.

Hard work and heavy responsibilities fell to the boy early in life, for his father died on February 6, 1858 – when William was but nine years of age. After his mother died on July 17, 1861, the children were separated and taken into the homes of relatives. William was now cared for by an aunt, whose farm was close to Gettysburg. The change made it possible for him to attend a better school and he was proud to become a student of Hunterstown Academy. Eagerly did he grasp this opportunity to prepare himself to render the greatest service in whatever life-work should open before him.

As William had heard at home of the battles in which his ancestors had fought, he may have wondered if some time he, too, would ever march away to war. He had never dreamed that while he was still a boy one of the most

important battles in modern history would take place in the quiet fields and on the wooded hills surrounding the little farm where he lived.

The first day of the great battle of Gettysburg, July 1, 1863, found him ready to take his part whatever it might be, even though he could not be one of the fighters. He soon found that there was no lack of opportunity to help. Fearlessly he went back and forth among the men of both the Northern and Southern armies, carrying water to the wounded no matter what the color of the uniform they wore, and relieving the distress of many a stricken soldier.

In the course of one of his errands of helpfulness he suddenly found himself at the side of the dreaded General Jenkins, whose cavalry raids had made his name a terror to all of the farmers of the region because of the heavy toll of horses, cattle, and grain which he took from them. Jenkins' present orders were to guard the baggage train and hospital of the Confederate army commanded by General Ewell, and as he waited at his post he chatted easily with the bright and attractive farmer lad who showed himself to be so interested in all the stirring events that were going on around him.

William was a loyal Federal at heart and he felt decidedly uncomfortable in the presence of the Southerner as he followed the General's explanation of what was happening on the adjacent hills. It was a scene of furious struggle and of seemingly wild disorder upon which they looked. Now the Federals and now the men in gray appeared to have control. Then suddenly Jenkins shouted, "Now, boy, watch and you'll see one of the sights of the war!"

A fresh and powerful force of Confederate troops was advancing steadily, and to his dismay William saw that the blue lines along Seminary Ridge were giving way. It was one of the brilliant actions of the battle, the charge of a fiery Southern general, Jubal Early, and the boy's heart sank as the Federal positions were overrun and their guns captured. He could catch glimpses of the men in blue retreating through the streets of the little town of Gettysburg to the slopes of Cemetery Hill. He hid from the Confederate general his fear lest the attacking forces might drive the Northerners even further back. But as the afternoon passed the fighting became less violent, and when night fell Cemetery Hill was still in possession of Federal troops.

The following two days were filled with adventure for the boy as he saw thousands of men struggling desperately in the valleys and on the hills where he knew every path and almost every tree. It seemed very strange to him that these familiar places – Round Top, Little Round Top, Seminary Ridge, and the peach orchard should suddenly become of such importance. From the gossip of the village, however, he knew in general what the Federal commanders had to do, and to many a scouting party he was able to give valuable information about trails, roads, and observation points.

Everywhere there were wounded men crying for water, and all through the hot days William hurried from point to point carrying help and cheer. Often he

was in danger from the heavy shell fire, for Gettysburg saw the greatest artillery engagement that had ever been known. Five hundred and sixty-nine tons of shells were hurled by the opposing batteries in the course of three days. The boy had at one time a moment of breathless suspense when a cannon ball fell near him, but it failed to explode. Except for some powder marks on his face, he came through those trying days without injury.

William's work was not done when he had spent the daylight hours in going among the wounded on the field. In the evening, when there was a lull in the fighting, he went into the village carrying news of the battle and helping friends whose homes were surrounded by the fury of the conflict. He was saddened by the death of his friend Jennie Wade, a girl of twenty who had been killed by a chance shot that came through the door of the house. She was the only resident of the town killed during the whole battle.

The home of another friend, Josephine Rogers, stood where the thickest of the fight came in the last two days of battle. William watched over the safety of this eighteen-year-old girl, and was able to give assistance and comfort in the hours of danger. On the first day, as General Carroll of the Union forces fell back, he saw the girl at her door and exclaimed, "What are you doing here? This house is in the trail of the greatest battle of the war. Seek a place of safety!"

"Mother has gone, but I have bread in the oven. As soon as it is baked, I will go," replied Josephine.

When she took the fragrant bread out of the oven, there were so many hungry soldiers that wanted it that she decided to bake more for the struggling men. This work she continued for three days, and gave bread to the troops on both sides. Her home became a refuge for the wounded, and all the delicacies she could find were placed at the disposal of the soldiers. On the last day of the battle the house was in the line of General Pickett's charge against the Union lines on Cemetery Hill. From the riddled house the bodies of seventeen men were taken, some in blue, some in gray; but the nurse and benefactress of both came through the event without a scratch.

When at last the Confederates were forced to withdraw, after having struggled gallantly but in vain to drive the Union forces from Cemetery Hill, and from the adjoining hills now famous in history – Round Top and Little Round Top – it was found that rarely if ever had armies suffered such a high proportion of losses. Meade, the Federal commander, went into the battle with eighty-two thousand men. The loss in killed, wounded, and missing was twenty-three thousand. General Lee had moved on Gettysburg with about seventy-three thousand men, and his losses were as large as those of Meade if not larger.

The scenes of daring and of strife in those exciting days of battle, and the talks with the wounded men, could not but make a deep impression on such a thoughtful boy as William Van Orsdel. He saw what men were given power to accomplish when they held their lives as nothing in the struggle for the things

which they believed to be right. The memory of those stirring days with the acts and sacrifice of heroism which he had witnessed, made him long for the time when as a man he could engage in such deeds of action and daring as those of the soldiers. With the thoughtfulness which marked his quiet days on the farm and in the country school, he now began to look forward to some life task that would call for hardship and adventure and would make his life of the largest service to those in need.

The Call to Montana

After the battle, Van Orsdel changed remarkably. To him and others who had witnessed the terrible strife, life, death, God, man, eternity took on new meaning – or, rather, took on meaning at all. Shortly thereafter, he attended one of the periodic revival services held on the Gettysburg circuit of the United Brethren Church, confessed himself a sinner, and knelt at the altar to receive Christ. He had always been fascinated with stories of the West – the Lewis and Clark expedition, the American Indian. Now he felt he was being called to preach the Gospel on that wild frontier.

His Methodist family was overjoyed at the prospect of having a clergyman in the family. An Aunt volunteered to raise the money for him to attend Dickinson College in Carlisle, and then it would be off to the new theological seminary at Madison NJ. But Van Orsdel wanted to leave immediately and could not see spending seven or eight years in school while Indians and settlers were perishing in the West. The Methodist pastor on Gettysburg circuit, George Berkstresser, also counseled for education at Dickinson and Drew, but the young man could not be dissuaded. Finally, in 1870 at the age of 22, William Van Orsdel set out for the West – and would not return to Adams County again until 1913, at the age of 75.

Van Orsdel was not ordained, he had little money or supplies, and he had no formal plan or authorization to undertake the mission to which he felt called. His strategy was to preach his way across the country, and his first stop was Oil City PA, where he had a distant cousin who worked in the newly-opened oil fields. He took a job operating a pump, but then found out he was expected to work on Sunday. When he protested and was told he could hire a substitute, he replied, “I’d just as soon do it myself as cause another to work on the Lord’s Day. I’ll do neither.” That courageous reply earned him the position, and he never had to work on Sundays.

The young preacher-to-be soon organized and taught a Sunday School class. When assigned preachers failed to show for the regular appointments, or when evangelists scheduled to lead bush meetings failed to appear, Van Orsdel stepped in and filled the pulpit. Soon he was asked by the neighboring communities to preach for himself. Successful meetings with numerous conversions were held in several communities, and Van Orsdel found that he had

the gift of singing powerfully and movingly the gospel songs that were just coming into popularity by the likes of Moody, Sankey, Bliss and Towner.

In 1872, Van Orsdel met Bishop Charles McCabe, a cousin of Mary Iliff, whose husband Thomas Iliff¹ had just been appointed missionary to the Rocky Mountains, stationed in the Montana Territory at Missoula. When McCabe suggested that the young preacher consider going to Montana, that was all he needed to hear. He set off on an overland rail route to Sioux City IA, from which point he would travel the Missouri River into Montana. McCabe thrust a twenty-dollar bill in his hand, and he was off.

Having run out of money by the time he got to Sioux City, he stayed there for a while in the Methodist parsonage helping the assigned elder with the work in that city. As no boats going up river were taking on crew members, and he had no money to pay the \$100 necessary to travel as a passenger, the journey seemed to come to a temporary halt. He finally convinced a captain to take him at a reduced rate if he would preach and minister to the people during the trip and if the captain were willing to receive \$50 when the boat returned to Sioux City – for friends in Gettysburg had promised to send that much to the parsonage there.

He arrived in Fort Benton MT at 7 am on Sunday, June 30, 1872. It being the Sabbath, he was amazed at the total disregard for any recognition of that fact. He proceeded to find a saloon and sang and preached the first Protestant sermon in that town. First he sang *In the Sweet By and By* and was surprised when the saloon pianist picked it up and began accompanying him. He sang four or five Moody and Sankey hymns, and the crowd roared for more. Then he sang what would prove to be his trademark song in Montana, *Diamonds in the Rough* – the story of Charley Byron, a famous clown with a well-known circus who became converted and changed his ways,

*While walking out one evening, not knowing where to go,
Just to pass the time away, before we held our show,
I heard the gospel mission band singing with all their might;
I gave my heart to Jesus, and left the show that night.
I used to dance the polka, the schottische, and the waltz;
I loved the theater with all its glittering show and fuss;
When Jesus found me, he found me crude and tough,
But praise the Lord, he saved me: I'm a diamond in the rough!*

Some cried, and he had to repeat the song three times. Then he spoke on God's love and man's unworthiness. When his hour was up and the bar was reopened, they did not want to let him go.

"What's your name, preacher?" someone cried.

"William Wesley Van Orsdel," he said.

"We'll just call you 'Brother Van,'" drawled another – an army scout named Young Tatton, who became a lifelong friend and protector of the preacher, and later Judge Tatton of the Montana Supreme Court.

... And from then on he was never known by any other name in Montana.

Brother Van Finds His Calling

The Missouri enabled shallow-draft boats to reach Fort Benton, but after that it was every man for himself. Brother Van continued west across Montana, preaching as he went and seeking Indians with whom he could share the gospel. His first stop was in Sun River at the home of a Mr. Bull, a Methodist recently arrived from Kansas, where he gathered the neighbors together for the first ever worship service in that region – a service that produced an enduring congregation and eventually a six point charge.

He finally reached the Blackfoot reservation near Choteau, at the foot of the Rockies. Here he won the confidence and love of the tribe. He was adopted into the tribe and given the name “Great Heart.” It was also here that he participated in his first buffalo hunt, immortalized in the noted painting of western artist and sculptor Charles M. Russell, in which Brother Van shot the lead buffalo of a large stampede. One version of the incident relates that the Indians gave him that dangerous assignment to test his mettle and the power of his religion. The original of that painting now hangs in the hospital in Great Falls that was founded by Van Orsdel.



Charles M. Russell's painting "Brother Van Shooting Buffalo"

From the Blackfoot reservation, Brother Van proceeded on to Helena. Like all mining towns, it was extremely rough in more ways than one – consisting of several saloons, each supporting a dance hall, a few log stores, and a row of log cabins and huts. Brother Van was not the first preacher to come to Helena. A few years previous a Methodist preacher by the name of Hugh Duncan had come

in by stage from Salt Lake City. His fellow-passengers in the coach had been two quiet, well-mannered gentlemen. Rev. Duncan found a room in the settlement's lone hotel. As he walked down the gulch the next morning after breakfast, he was surprised to find his erstwhile traveling companions swinging at rope's end from the limb of tree. Vigilantes had reckoned them to be likely members of the infamous Plummer gang, a determination which later proved to be false, and had strung them up without formality.

Some years later Brother Van almost got his own taste of vigilante justice. For a two-day walking trip from Bozeman to Radersburg, a newly-arisen mining camp some miles to the north, he discarded his usual ministerial attire and was garbed in nondescript cowboy clothes and a flat-crowned hat. By the time he reached Radersburg he was covered with fine dust and looked like anything but a preacher – but he did bear a resemblance to a large poster in the post office window that was captioned “Horse Thief - \$100 Reward.” A crowd gathered. One man threw a rope over the beam of an unfinished building, and there were several guns out.

“I know what you fellows think. You think I’m that horse thief they’ve got posted. Well, I’m not. I’m a preacher. I’ve come to Radersburg to sing and pray, not to steal.”

“What’s your name?” someone called out.

“They call me Brother Van.”

“If you’re really Brother Van, you sing *Diamonds in the Rough* for us and we’ll believe you.”

Brother Van never sang *Diamonds in the Rough* with more fervor than he did that afternoon. Years later he used to joke about his Radersburg experience: “I had a good revival at Radersburg once. I saved a man just through my singing. Me!”

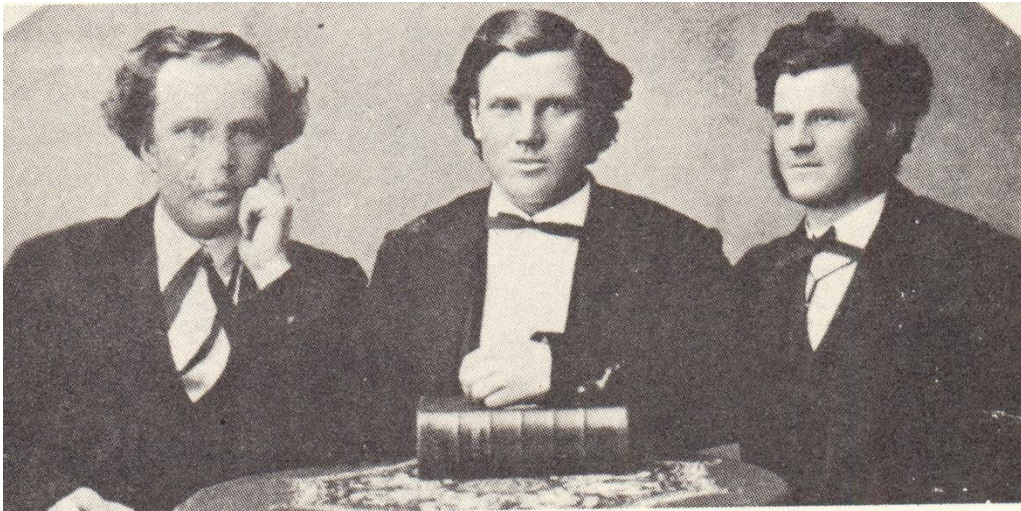
Brother Van worked out of Helena for the next few months, riding to “near-by” camps – some of them more than 100 miles distant – to preach and conduct Sunday School. In this way he came to the end of his first year in Montana.

The Circuit Rider

During his first year in Montana Brother Van operated with no ecclesiastical authorization. He received no regular salary, and he subsisted on whatever he could get in collections at the various meetings he held. In July 1873, he wrote to the Rocky Mountain Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which had just been organized the previous year, and applied for a regular appointment. The Conference had heard of him and, sight unseen, gave him a regular appointment. There were just two appointments for Montana Territory read off at the annual conference in Salt Lake City that year.

BEAVERHEAD AND JEFFERSON DISTRICT – F.A. Riggins and William Van Orsdel
BOZEMAN CIRCUIT – Thomas C. Iliff

Francis Riggins, Brother Van, and Thomas Iliff formed a team that changed and influenced Montana much as the Wesleyan movement changed and influenced England – especially Brother Van and Thomas Iliff, whose kindred spirit caused them to be dubbed “The Heavenly Twins.” The Lyle Johnston article in *Methodist History* cited in the bibliography tells of the unique and powerful relationship these two pioneer preachers enjoyed.



William Van Orsdel, Thomas Iliff, and Francis Riggins (circa 1873)

Brother Van’s official service record in the Methodist Episcopal Church is

1873	admitted to Rocky Mountain Conference
1873-74	Beaverhead and Jefferson Circuit
1874-75	Virginia City and Deer Lodge
1875-77	Fish Creek and Beaverhead Circuit
1877	charter member of Montana Conference
1875-77	Fish Creek and Beaverhead Circuit
1878-79	Sheridan and Bannack
1879-80	Sun River and Smith River Circuit
1880-84	missionary at large
1884-85	Gallatin Valley and missionary
1885-86	Judith Basin Circuit and missionary
1886-87	Judith Basin
1887-88	Fort Benton and Great Falls and Manitoba Railroad
1888-89	Fort Benton and Great Falls
1889-90	Cooke City
1890-92	superintendent, Great Falls District
1892-97	superintendent, North Montana Mission
1897-99	superintendent, Helena District
1899-07	superintendent, North Montana Mission
1907	charter member of North Montana Conference
1907-13	superintendent, Great Falls District
1913-19	superintendent , Milk River District

In addition, he was a lay delegate to the 1876 General Conference (as he was not ordained until 1877), and a clergy delegate to the General Conferences of 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1916.

The notable, dangerous, inspiring and spiritually powerful incidents that occurred during the ministry of Brother Van are too numerous to report here, and the reader is referred to the sources listed in the bibliography. One early incident occurred in 1874, after Brother Van and Thomas Iliff formally met and bonded at the Conference in Salt Lake City and had a time of fellowship on the return trip to Montana that set the tone for the rest of their joint ventures and evangelistic campaigns. The Brummit biography relates this Virginia City incident which occurred on their first joint endeavor as follows.

“They rode into the town unannounced and proceeded to seek a place where they might hold meetings. The old opera house was secured and there they began their preaching and singing. The people attended out of curiosity at first, but a real earnestness came with the passing days, and many were started on the way toward living a new, clean life.

“Billy Blay was one of the men who left off his evil habits. The evangelists had heard of this notorious drunkard. They went to his hut with its dirt roof and floor, where the poor sot was huddled in his blankets. They talked with him about other ways of living, and prayed with him. He promised to come to church, and to the amazement of the townspeople, Billy Blay not only kept his promise, but he came sober. During the services he was saved from his sins and took a fresh start in life. After realizing that his sins would be forgiven, he said, ‘Give me pen and paper. I want to write my wife and children in Wisconsin.’

“That Billy Blay could write was astonishing to the people of the town, who knew him only as a notorious drunkard. Now he wrote like an educated man. While he waited for an answer to the letter which broke a twelve years’ silence, he gave himself into the care of Brother Van and Dr. Iliff. He had great natural ability, and he spoke to others about his new experience so effectively that he was at last given an exhorter’s license and made a third member of the evangelistic group.

“After a little time Billy Blay heard from his wife. She was ill, and had believed him to be dead. Money for his journey back home was raised in the two institutions of the town that knew him, the church and the saloon, and the family was reunited. This new preacher gave his life to missionary work in a logging camp in Wisconsin.”

Not all the time was Brother Van building churches – although there were about 100 churches and 50 parsonages erected in Montana as direct fruit of his labor. The following sections tell a little of the stories behind the two institutions of learning, six hospitals, and other benevolent works also erected in the state as the direct legacy of Brother Van.

Montana Wesleyan College

In 1877 there were no colleges at all in the Montana Territory, and high school education was confined largely to Roman Catholic convents and mission schools. Brother Van, who had been concerned about this situation for some time, could not have been more pleased when the newly organized Montana Conference held its first meeting in Bozeman in August, 1877, and passed the following resolution: *That Governor B.F. Potts, F.A. Riggin, Clark Wright, W.W. Alderson, and W.W. Van Orsdel be and are hereby appointed a committee to take such measures as they shall think best toward the establishment of a school at one of the principal points in the Territory.*

After eleven years of promotion and fund raising, one of the most ardent supporters and most generous donors being Brother Van, property was purchased in the Prickly Pear Valley outside Helena. Montana Wesleyan opened in 1892 with 60 students and 6 faculty members. As things were booming in Helena, Brother Van and the other trustees saw a great opportunity in the valley. They acquired an additional 100 acres to split into building lots and erect a Christian community around the college. The Helena streetcar company extended its tracks five miles out into the valley. But no sooner had the lots been subdivided and the streetcar line extended than the depression of 1893 struck the nation. The student body that had numbered approximately 100 at the close of spring term shrunk to 5 at the beginning of the fall semester.

The Conference favored liquidating the entire project. After the streetcar tracks were removed, the school was physically isolated – separated from Helena by 5 miles of barely passable roads over which all supplies had to be brought in by wagon. In 1898 the property in Prickly Pear Valley was abandoned and the school relocated to buildings purchased in Helena. In 1905 a new site was secured for the campus, a few blocks north and east of the capitol building. But despite occasional bequests, the college was never a financial success. At every session of Conference, the question of closing Montana Wesleyan was furiously debated. Finally, at the conference of 1912, some of the more practical brethren agreed on a strategy. They would wait until Brother Van was not present and then introduce a motion to close the school. This opportunity came one day when Brother Van left early for lunch, and a motion to close the school was hastily passed.

But a Montana Wesleyan student who happened to be present rushed out, located the restaurant where Brother Van was eating, and brought him back just as the Conference was about to adjourn. Like small boys caught playing hooky, the other members of Conference stirred uneasily in their seats and wouldn't make eye contact with their senior member. "Under God, brethren," shouted the old warrior, "these things cannot be! We have set our hand to the plow. We must not turn back. We cannot do this to our boys and girls. The school must stay open. Who doubts it? We must pray! To prayer, brethren!"

He was clearly out of order; the affair was settled. But bishop Naphtali Luccock, who had known him for a long time, did not rebuke him. He smiled behind his hand and dropped to his knees with the others. “Oh God,” prayed Brother Van, forgive us for having so little faith...” On and on he prayed, recalling the old days, evoking deeply buried memories. One by one, others came to kneel by his side to add their prayers and “amens.” Brother Van rose from his feet to sing the final stanza of *Diamonds in the Rough*:

The day will soon be over, and diggings will be done;

A few more gems to gather, so let us now press on.

When Jesus comes to claim you and says you’ve done enough,

The diamonds will be shining, no longer in the rough.

After a few more of the old songs, Brother Van moved to reconsider the motion to close Montana Wesleyan. A chorus of “ayes” drowned out the few scattered “nays” and once again the old warrior had saved the school he loved.

In 1923, Montana College in Deer Lodge, an institution of the Presbyterian Church with roots going back to 1878, merged into Montana Wesleyan to form Intermountain Union College. That institution occupied the Helena campus until 1935, when an earthquake destroyed some of the buildings. The school temporarily relocated in Great Falls for one year, and then moved to Billings in 1936 to share a campus with Billings Polytechnic Institute, which had been founded in 1908. In 1947 those two institutions formally merged to form Rocky Mountain College – which exists today as a school affiliated with the United Methodist Church.



Van Orsdel Hall (2010) of Montana Wesleyan College²

Helena, Montana

photo courtesy of Tom Kilmer, Helena MT

Deaconess Hospitals

The written history of the Montana Deaconess Hospitals is an inspiring story. The first steps toward founding a Methodist medical facility in Montana were taken at the North Montana Mission annual session in 1896 when Brother Van was named chairman of a committee with power to act to erect a hospital. Lots were secured in Great Falls, a 20-bed capacity brick building was erected, and deaconesses were obtained from the mother house in Chicago. In 1898 Brother Van reported that “the deaconesses were developing a glorious work... it is difficult to tell where the Hospital will lead to in its ultimate outcome.”

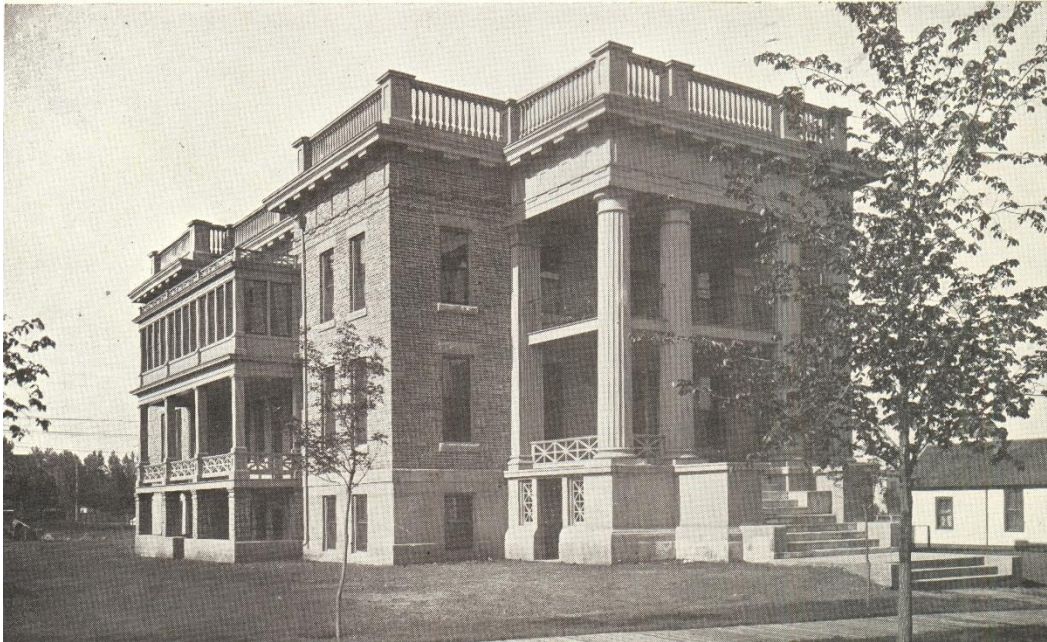
Space does not permit a full accounting of all the details, but the ultimate outcome was six operating Deaconess Hospitals across Montana, with Brother Van as the primary driving force behind the movement. Mills’ book on the history of Montana Methodism calls Van Orsdel “the founder of the Deaconess Hospital work in Montana.” Those projects that were conceived during his lifetime are as follows.

- Great Falls (1896): Montana Deaconess Hospital was begun in 1896. After a shaky start it developed into the Great Fall Deaconess Hospital, and it is now part of the Benefis Health System.
- Billings (1907): Billings Deaconess Hospital was incorporated in 1907 but didn’t open until after World War I. In 1993 the hospital merged with Billings Clinic, which had evolved from a medical practice begun in 1911, to form the Deaconess Billings Clinic. In 2005 the name was shortened to Billings Clinic.
- Glasgow (1911): Frances Mahon Deaconess Hospital in Glasgow was opened by the Conference in 1911, and it continues to operate under that name.
- Bozeman (1911): Bozeman Deaconess Hospital was established in 1911 when the former Blair Sanitarium was purchased, and it continues to operate under that name.
- Havre (1916): Kennedy Deaconess Hospital was envisioned in 1916 and formally opened in 1926. In 1968 Kennedy Deaconess Hospital and its Roman Catholic counterpart Sacred Heart Hospital merged to form the present Northern Montana Hospital
- Butte (1918): A Deaconess Hospital was opened in Butte in 1918 and gave excellent service for several years before being forced to close owing to financial difficulties caused by the Great Depression.
- Sidney (1919): The Conference took over the Sidney Hospital, which had started in 1907, in 1919. In 1946, the operation was reorganized as a non-profit, non-sectarian institution and was named Community Memorial Hospital. In 1996, Community Memorial Hospital merged with Richland Homes and became the present Sidney Health Center.

Brother Van was not satisfied with hospital buildings alone. His vision of bringing Christ to Montana included supplying those hospitals with qualified personnel. He worked tirelessly with the Training School in Chicago to provide

nurses for Montana and to set up facilities to train and house deaconesses on the frontier.

The story is told that at one time some gamblers and saloon men wanted to tell Brother Van that they respected him and wished him well. He had fought the saloon with a zeal that could not be misunderstood, but he fought fairly. He hated the business and told its supporters so in no mincing language; but he didn't hate the men, and they knew that. They decided to raise one thousand dollars and give it to him that he might buy a home of his own, or that he might have the money to do with as we wished. The funds were put in a bank and forgotten until a gambler who was on his death bed told the preacher about the money that had been accumulating interest. Brother Van drew it out and soon a nurses' home was started.



The Van Orsdel Home for Nurses (1919)
Great Falls, Montana

Montana Deaconess School

For many years, one of Brother Van's enterprises seemed not to be of God's planning – the original home of Montana Wesleyan five miles from Helena. People spoke of the neglected building as a mistake and an expensive failure. Every pane of glass in the three-story building had been broken by rocks, coyotes occupied the large dining room, and the darkened nooks and crannies were occupied by bats and owls. Occasionally a solitary figure would visit the site, kneel in the dust, and implore God to bring meaning and use to the building.

As the years passed, this man began to see another need within his cherished Montana. While young people were now coming to Montana Wesleyan

College in Helena, there were many unschooled children with no such visible hopes – orphans that needed protection, children too far from district schools to receive an education. This became a new and dear care to Brother Van.

At Brother Van's urging, money slowly came in for the project and the building was cleaned and repaired and put in readiness in 1909 for its first pupil – a child whom a dying mother had committed to the care of Brother Van. Deaconesses were secured, and other needy children were placed in the facility. The title page of the first Annual published by the students of this school of faith is inscribed: "To Brother Van, as an expression of love, from the class of 1915."

That building is now within the growing city of Helena, at the corner of North Montanan Avenue and Sierra Drive. Today the former Bozeman Deaconess School is Intermountain, a nationally accredited non-profit organization providing mental health and educational services, including residential treatment, to children and families in need. As noted on their web page, "Operating for more than 100 years, Intermountain is one of Montana's oldest child welfare agencies."



original Prickly Pear Valley building, 5 miles outside Helena
used by Montana Wesleyan College and Montana Deaconess School

The Statesman

Montana became a state on February 22, 1889, and Helena became the capital. When the new capitol building was ready to be dedicated on July 4 of that year, the choice of Brother Van to offer the dedicatory prayer was unanimous. Brummitt's biography of Brother Van records that prayer as follows:

"O thou God of our fathers, we draw near to thee in the name of thy Son, our Saviour, to acknowledge the many blessings of which we are the recipients, on this our nation's birthday; the day when this was declared to be a free and independent nation, and which now stands out among the nations as a star of the first magnitude. O God, may thy presence ever abide with our nation. We invoke thy blessing on our President, and those associated with him in directing the affairs of the nation.

"We are here in this great new commonwealth, pioneer men and women, who came here in the earlier settlements and opened up the way for success; we are here today with our children and associates to honor the state and thee. We are here to dedicate and set apart this magnificent building, this capitol building, to the purpose for which it was built. Let thy blessing rest on the exercises of this hour. May thy blessing rest on the government of the state, the officers, the capitol commission, and all who have been associated with the planning and completing of the building.

"Let thy blessing be upon our representatives, on both houses of congress, on state senators and legislators, who shall meet in this house from time to time. May we all realize that great is that people whose God is the Lord. May we flee evil. Amen"

Today the state remembers the "Best Loved Man in Montana" through the Brother Van House Museum at 113 Sixth Street North in Great Falls. This is the only Montana home that Brother Van ever knew, as he like Francis Asbury before him spent his entire career riding the circuit. The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a United Methodist Historical Site. The building was erected in 1910 as the parsonage for the Great Falls Church, but a room was set aside for Brother Van, who was then serving as District Superintendent, and he lived there the rest of his life. The museum includes Brother Van's own furnishings, and guided tours recreate story of Brother Van.

The Return to Gettysburg and Beyond

In 1913 Brother Van made the long cross-country trip to return to Gettysburg for the first time since 1870. He arrived just in time for the great Blue-Gray reunion that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle. He noted that a large part of the battlefield had been purchased by the United States government, and that the federal and state governments had spent seven million dollars erecting monuments to honor those who had participated in the three-day struggle. He saw again the house in which President Lincoln was entertained when he made his memorable address. He recalled how at that time he had gone

to seek the sad-faced man. He had come into his presence a towed, barefoot, awkward boy, and with new appreciation he remembered how he had shaken hands with him – not knowing that at least three other presidents (Grant, Roosevelt and Taft) would one day shake hands with the boy grown into a missionary.

Once back in Montana, he took a leaf from Chaplain McCabe's book and began giving lectures on "What a Boy Saw at the Battle of Gettysburg" – as McCabe had done recounting his experiences in Libby Prison. Each lecture was accompanied by *Diamonds in the Rough* and other gospel songs.

At seventy-one, Brother Van was to begin a series of evangelistic meetings at Chinook, in his old Milk River District. Just as he was about to start for the church, he suffered a paralytic stroke, lost consciousness for days, and could not speak. Too ill to be moved to the hospital he had built in Great Falls, he spent his last days at the home of friend.

On the night of December 19, 1919, he roused from his coma and began singing:

*Over and over; yes deeper and deeper,
My heart is pierced through
With life's sorrow and cry.
But the tears of the sower and the songs of the reaper
Shall mingle together
In joy by and by.*

He was back in Montana, singing to an audience in a brothel at Last Chance Gulch. When he had finished singing, he talked – clearly and amiably – to friends long since dead of things long since past. He talked to Tom Iliff, argued with Billy Blay about the condition of his soul, planned a revival in Bannack with Frank Riggan, spoke of the long stage ride from Salt Lake to Virginia City, planned a buffalo hunt with his old friend Wolf Chief of the Blackfeet, he spoke tenderly to Jennie Johnson³ – a girl whose name meant nothing to the friends who were gathered about his deathbed.

Brother Van's funeral, which was held at Great Falls, was the largest in the history of the state. Two governors delivered eulogies, Charles Russell and Judge Tatton and other dignitaries served as pall bearers, and the state capitol was draped in mourning with its flag at half-mast. He was laid to rest at Helena's Forestvale Cemetery, in a little grove in the Prickly Pear Valley, in the corner of the cemetery nearest to the original valley home of Montana Wesleyan. His resting place was marked with a simple, rugged boulder bearing only his name.



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ENDNOTES

¹ Thomas Corwin Iliff (1845-1918) would become a lifelong comrade of Brother Van, so much so that the two of them would be called "The Heavenly Twins." For this issue of *The Chronicle* it should be noted that they MAY have even seen each other without knowing it at the Battle of Gettysburg, in which Iliff was a member of the Union Army while Van Orsdel was a civilian observer. Their combined preacher-singer evangelistic team that tamed Montana was later enthusiastically received at several General Conferences. Iliff graduated from Ohio University in Athens OH in 1870 and received honorary doctorates from both Ohio and DePauw Universities. He is a first cousin to John Wesley Iliff (1831-1878), the wealthy cattle baron and namesake of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver CO.

² Other traces of Montana Wesleyan College still exist. When the institution moved to Helena in 1899, it occupied two buildings: "College Hall" located on the southeast corner of Warren Street and Helena Avenue (now Helena Body and Paint Inc. at 839 North Warren Avenue), and the first "Mills Hall" located at 643-649 North Ewing Street (also still standing). The school moved again in 1912 and established its campus across from the present Capitol Hill Mall. The structure at 1539 11th Avenue, currently home to the Department of Corrections, was once part of the complex. The pictured empty shell of the Van Orsdel Building, newly opened when the 1935 earthquakes struck, stands just off Montana Avenue. After the earthquakes, the Deaconess School moved into the 11th Avenue campus.

³ Brother Van never married. Up to the day of his death, not many understood the reason. At the last Conference he was permitted to attend, at Dillon MT, he confided the secret that he had kept for 50 years to the Rev. John Chirgwin, with the promise that no one should know about it until after his death. About 1880 Brother Van was hosted by the Johnson family, near the present town of Dillon, and began a relationship with their daughter Jennie. The parents, who were prosperous, desired to educate their daughter and sent her to Northwestern University in Chicago so that she might fill her place acceptably in a Methodist parsonage. Unfortunately, she developed tuberculosis and died October 16, 1881. All the rest of his life, whenever Brother Van visited that town, he never failed to visit the little cemetery and put a flower on her grave.

At this last Conference, in August, 1919, in company with his hosts for the Conference and an elderly lady who had been a girlhood friend of Jennie's and Rev. Chirgwin, he traveled the three miles to the little cemetery and placed a bouquet of flowers on the grave. He offered a prayer, placed his hand on the tombstone, and lingered a few moments in silence as tears trickled down his cheeks. Turning to Rev. Chirgwin, he said, "Now, John, keep this a secret as long as I live, but you may tell it after I'm in Heaven."