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ROBINSON, REUBEN C.

A CIRCUIT RIDER
IN EARLY INDIANA

(1380/1755)



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A Circuit Rider in Early Indiana

A CIRCUIT RIDER IN EARLY INDIANA

Prepared by the Staff of the
Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County
1954

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FOREWORD

In the early days on the frontier, the spiritual needs of the settlers were served by circuit riders. These itinerant preachers traveled from one settlement to another usually on horseback. Among the circuit riders in early Indiana was Elder Reuben D. Robinson of the Methodist church. The following interview with Elder Robinson, reprinted from an Indianapolis paper, appeared in the FORT WAYNE SENTINEL on December 28, 1880.

The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this article in the hope that it will interest and inform local readers. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation have been changed to conform to current usage.

Time has indeed been generous with Elder Reuben D. Robinson, for while something like the rose of youth yet lingers upon his cheek, he may justly be considered one of the fathers of the Methodist church in Indiana. After graduating from the university at Greencastle, he chose the profession of medicine; but he early became more concerned with the spiritual than with the physical ills of man. He applied for and obtained a license and in 1845 entered upon the duties of a Methodist minister. The first circuit to which he was assigned comprised Tipton County and parts of Howard, Carroll, Clinton, and Boone counties. There was not even one inhabitant to every square mile of territory, and the settlements were only connected by blazed trails.

Elder Robinson held a brief interview with a reporter of the INDIANAPOLIS SENTINEL yesterday. It had to be brief because the Elder is now doing all the work that devolves upon the head of the Kokomo Conference and because he was busy shaping a sermon to be delivered in Peru on Friday evening. He talked of olden times and read entries which he had made in his journal in 1846. This conversation took place in the library of his residence in Indianapolis at the corner of New Jersey and North streets.

The salary of a Methodist minister in those days was one hundred dollars a year. That was the amount he expected to receive, but he was fortunate to collect eighty dollars. His expenses, he says, were scarcely anything; he was a mere boy, at home everywhere in the neighborhood. The people had an abundance of everything but money, and for that article they had very little use. The streams yielded fish, and the forests supplied game, wild fruit, and even an abundance of honey. Until the railroads came, the popular wants were decidedly primitive. That was before the day of store clothes. Every woman was proficient in the use of the spinning wheel, and the hand looms had a place in every thrifty household.

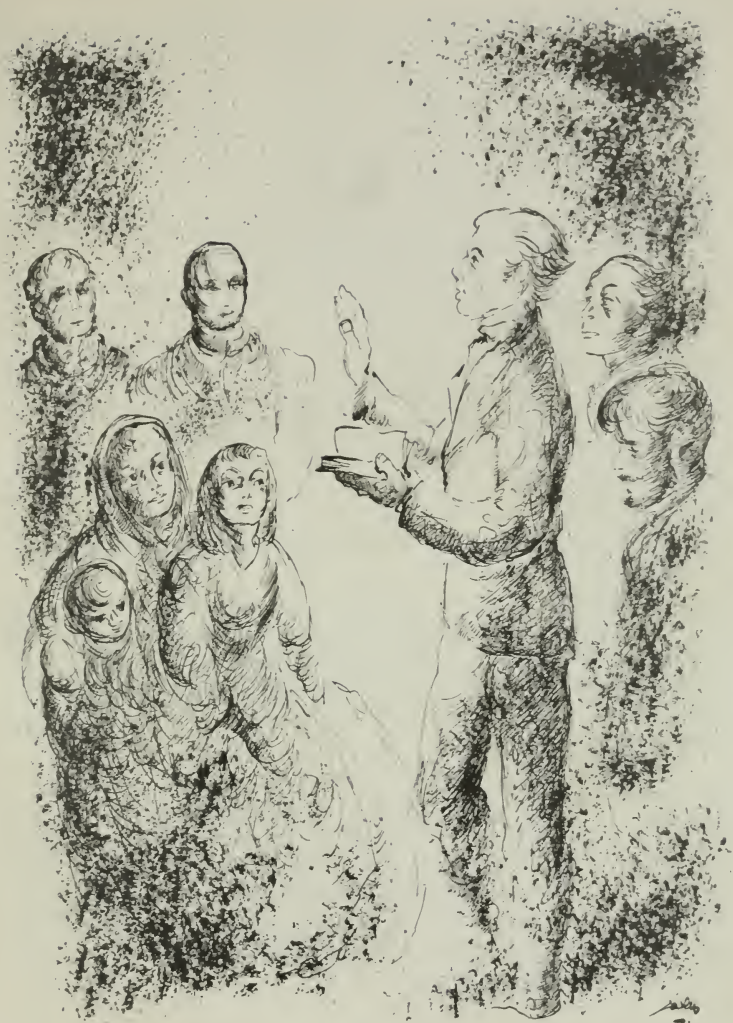
There were no church buildings in that section of the country at that time, and services were held in the various houses of the neighborhood. When the weather was at all favorable, the con-

gregations were immense; the people--old and young--came from a distance of ten miles in every direction. A walk of four miles was nothing to a Hoosier of that day.

Not long ago, the Elder says, a venerable woman arose in class meeting. She said that the first time she had ever seen the presiding elder, he was quite a young man, preaching in a house in which there was neither door nor window. He stood in the chimney corner, and the only light by which he could read came through the roof. Elder Robinson remembered the place and at once recognized the good old sister.

Indoor services were held only during the winter. In summer the woods offered a better place for such gatherings. Groves have been the scenes of the strongest religious meetings ever conducted. Much of Wesley's and Whitefield's success may properly be attributed to the fact that they spoke in the open air. There was not a power press in the world at that day. The newspaper was not a daily or weekly visitor then as now; the preacher and the schoolteacher were the only popular instructors.

The Elder read entries about his journey in 1846 on horseback from Frankfort in Clinton County to witness a session of the legislature. He noted the meeting of Dr. Evans, who was then representative of Tippecanoe, but who has since served as governor of Colorado. The Elder, having been born and reared near Lafayette, was acquainted with Dr. Evans and also with governor-elect Albert G. Porter, who was a schoolmate. The Elder devoted six days to the study of this deliberative body and then started for home. On the way he traveled with a New Yorker, who seems to have been a gentleman of only tolerable intelligence but with a copious flow of profanity. He was disgusted with the people of Indiana; he thought their ignorance intolerable; and he abominated the corn bread upon which they fattened. The stranger believed that the minister was a Quaker--a belief that was not opposed. Except for his vulgar oaths, he might have been a more acceptable traveling companion. At last the Elder, annoyed beyond endurance, demanded that he define and analyze the word damn. Soon after this they parted.



..the only light came through the roof..

The Elder also read an account of a visit to an Indian town from the city of Kokomo in the winter of 1846. Snow covered the ground, but he rightly judged the quality of the land from the timber. He remarked the stately walnut, oak, poplar, and sugar trees. After wandering for some time he struck a blazed trail and reached the Indian town without much difficulty. It was inhabited by a remnant of the Miami tribe. The chief, once fully persuaded that he had not come for the purpose of buying or selling but purely out of curiosity, received him with great hospitality, and every courtesy that the camp afforded was at his service. He described the dress of the Indian women, which must have been rather elegant. The name of the chief was Sharpandorsh. The aborigines had just returned from a visit to the Far West, but the chief did not like the country. He had visited the Osage tribe. When asked what he thought of them, he answered, "Him heap ugly."

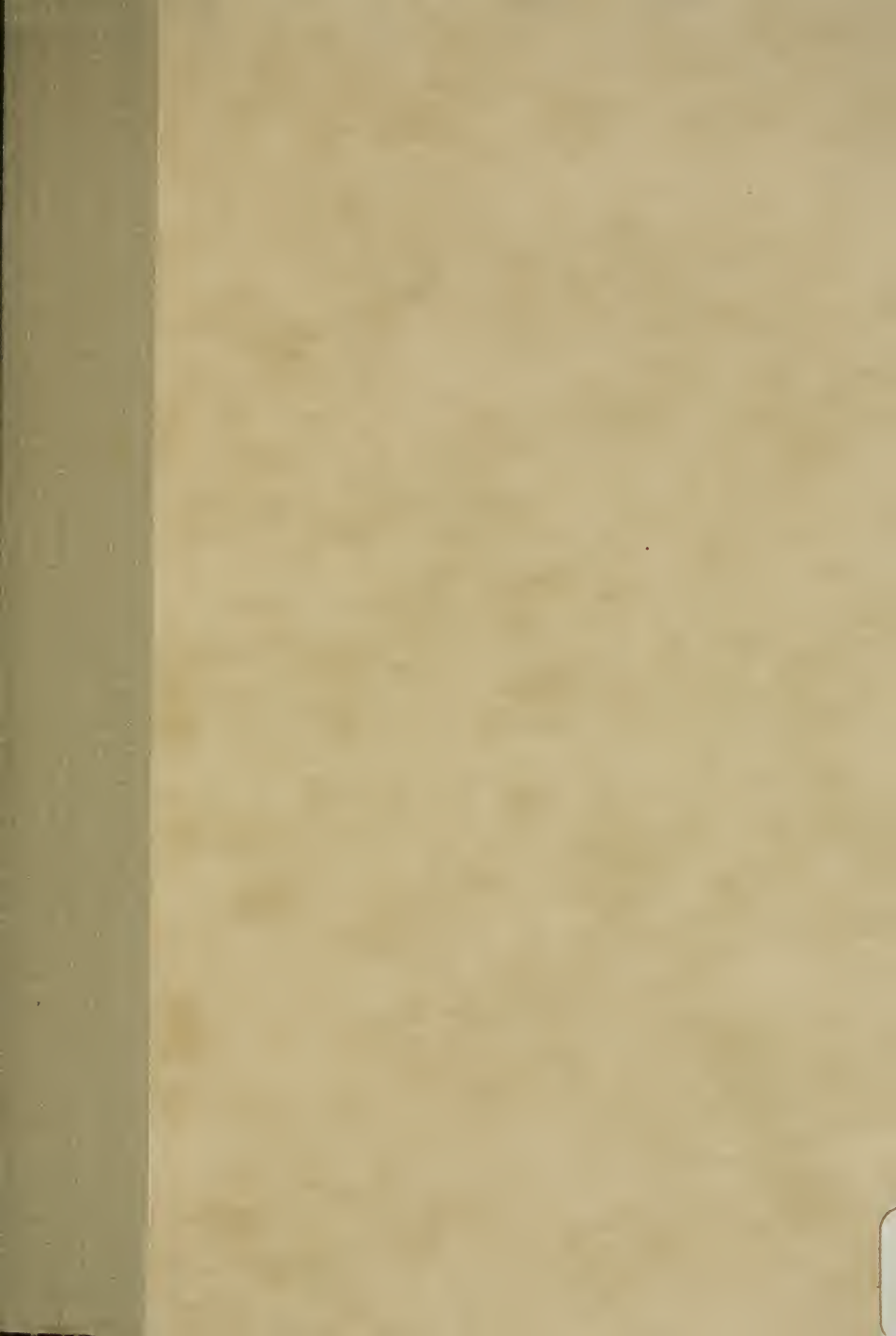
When the Elder was asked if the people of those days were happy and contented, he answered, "I never have seen a happier people. They were perfectly contented."

"Did they talk in those days much about the progress the country was likely to make?"

"Not much. I have no reason to believe they ever contemplated the great change that has taken place. I often wonder now, in passing through that country and in looking upon those large, magnificent farms, why it never occurred to me to purchase some of the land. I could have obtained a nice tract, but the idea never entered my head."

The Elder held a position for some years in the university at Fort Wayne, and his library consists largely of textbooks. He has, however, a vast amount of Methodist literature and many volumes of what is considered polite and liberal reading. On one shelf between Dr. Clark's COMMENTARIES and a classical dictionary was Andrew Jackson Davis' HARMONIAL PHILOSOPHY. When questioned about the work, he replied with a merry laugh that it was a harmless delusion.



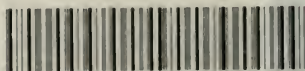


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