

----- Through The Years -----

During this Bi-Centennial year, there have been references to the circuit riders who spread the Methodist faith throughout the United States. Indeed, Mentor Methodist's first pastor, Rev. Ira Eddy, was a circuit rider. But how did the tradition of circuit riding pastors begin and what did they encounter?

The Methodist Episcopal faith in the 1770s had few followers in the United States. While other Protestant denominations, such as the Congregationalists, concentrated their efforts on the established cities of the eastern U. S., the Methodist church decided to spread the faith to everyone. Circuits were established for preachers to cover. John Wesley had started the idea of circuits back in Britain. However, due to the size of the U. S., these American circuits were considerably larger. The westward expansion of the nation also meant that many of these circuits were very wild and rugged.

A typical circuit rider was a young man, usually single, who had received the call to enter the ministry. Many of them did not have a great deal of formal religious training and often had another occupation. Francis Asbury, for example, was also a blacksmith. Many of these circuits could range from 200 to 500 miles. Often a minister would reach a location once every six weeks. This life could be physically demanding. Many circuit riders did not live past their early thirties. They encountered many hardships including exhaustion, illness, animal attacks and unfriendly encounters. They relied on followers for their meals or caught them themselves. They slept at the homes of followers, occasionally at Inns, or out in the open. In 1800, a Methodist Circuit Rider made only about one-fifth the income of his Congregationalist counterpart.

The dedication of these pastors and their ability to reach everyday people with their message resulted in an incredible rate of growth for the Methodist Episcopal (as it was known then) faith. From fewer than 1,000 in the 1770s, the church grew to over 200,000 by 1816 and to more than a million in 1844. The Methodist Episcopal Church became the largest religious denomination in the country by the 1820s.

Circuit riding (the term was never officially recognized by the church) ended before the Civil War. But through the efforts of these dedicated men, the word of God reached everyone in the country, no matter where they lived. We owe them a great deal of gratitude.

Do you have any MUMC history you would like to share with the congregation? Please send it to:

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