John Wesley sent Francis Asbury to America in 1771. However, the growth of Methodism in America was slowed down by the Revolutionary War. After the war, the Methodist Episcopal Church organized in 1784, where Asbury was also ordained a bishop. Asbury was a bishop on horseback. For forty-one years he traveled 6000 miles per year - totaling over a quarter of a million miles. He preached 16,500 sermons and ordained four thousand preachers. He became a legend. A friend in England once mailed him a letter addressed, “The Reverend Bishop Asbury, North America,” and it was delivered promptly. The largest annual salary he ever received was $80.

Francis Asbury made several circuits through the Carolinas in the 1790’s and 1800’s. His Journal recorded stops in Abbeville, Pendleton, Greenville, Spartanburg, and Laurens counties. The Methodist Church started in 1784 with 104 circuit riders. This was the itinerant or circuit ministry. By 1881 there were over 16,000 itinerant ministers and close to four million members. The secret to our rapid growth was that Methodism kept moving. As the young country moved westward, the Methodist circuit riders kept on the move. They lived in primitive conditions. An old expression was, “the weather is so bad no one out today but crows and Methodist preachers.”

Of the first 737 Methodist circuit riders, 203 died between the ages of 25-35 and 121 between the ages of 35-45. Two-thirds died before they could serve twelve years. Almost a third died within the first five years of ministry. The average life expectancy of a circuit rider was thirty-three years of age.

The itinerant ministry was a temporary method which required celibacy. If a circuit rider married, he had to “locate.” Asbury once exclaimed, “I believe the devil and the women will get my preachers!” By 1816, when Asbury died, celibacy was on its way out. Yet during the circuit rider era candidates for the ministry were asked four questions:

Is this man truly converted?
Does he know and keep our rules?
Can he preach acceptably?
Has he a horse?

A century ago, a man on the east coast had finally had more Methodist preachers than he could stand. They had converted his wife and daughter, and they were working on him. He was tired of it, so he packed his wife, daughter, and their belongings on a wagon and headed west. After a year on the road and across prairies when the road ended, he thought he was about ready to begin a new household. That evening while he was considering setting up his home where he camped, a young man rode up to their campfire and introduced himself as a Methodist Circuit Rider. The man’s anger was something to see. “I left the east to get away from you Methodists, and you are here also. Isn’t there anywhere we can go to escape?” The circuit rider laughed. “I’m sorry my friend, but even if you were to go to heaven or hell, there would be a Methodist preacher there first!”

Peter Cartwright (1785-1872) was the quintessential circuit rider. Although the circuit rider was dying out during his lifetime, Cartwright was a circuit rider for twenty years. He was groomed by Bishops Asbury and William McKendree and he preached in Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

Cartwright was converted at a camp meeting in 1801 and joined the Methodist Church. His autobiography was first published in 1856 and is still in print. In his book he gives an eyewitness account of the camp meeting. The great Cane Ridge camp meeting began in Kentucky as an interdenominational effort between Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. From this movement the Christian Church was organized. The Presbyterians soon abandoned the camp meeting method because it was too hard to control. However, Asbury felt it had potential. With great frontier crowds of thousands, the Methodist preachers had to guard against false doctrine, such as the Shakers, Universalists, anti-Trinitarians, and against Calvinists who would attempt to infiltrate the camp. Cartwright was also willing to debate Baptists and their “water-moccasin god” of immersion, when they infiltrated the camp to proselytize Methodist converts. The Methodists also had to control rowdies, those who would attempt to sell liquor outside the camp ground, and emotional excess, such as the jerks.

It took a rugged masculine leader to maintain order. Cartwright was famous for his willingness to thrash anyone who would attempt to disrupt the services. On one occasion, Cartwright had just entered the pulpit and was reading his text when he looked up and saw General Andrew Jackson taking his seat. Someone on the platform pulled Cartwright’s suit coat and whispered, “General Jackson has come in.” Cartwright was indignant and responded audibly, “Who is General Jackson? If he don’t get his soul converted, God will damn him as quick as he would a Guinea Negro!” The next day Jackson caught up with Cartwright and expressed his admiration. “If I had

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a few thousand such independent, fearless officers as you were, and a well-drilled army, I could take old England.”

In 1826 Cartwright learned that there were those who were trying to make Illinois a slave state and so he decided to run for office. He was elected twice to the legislature and reported that he found a great deal of corruption in the legislature. In his last attempt in politics he ran for Congress, but was defeated by his opponent, Abraham Lincoln.

Cartwright devoted an entire chapter to his encounters with early Mormons. Although they spare no effort today to appear mainstream, this autobiography is a primary source which demonstrates what cut-throats they were. Cartwright reported after one conversation he had with Joseph Smith that he was “a very illiterate and impudent desperado in morals, but at the same time, he had a vast fund of low cunning.”

Cartwright was a Methodist presiding elder (district superintendent) for fifty years. During that time he saw great change come to our nation. Toward the end of his life, Cartwright became a great advocate for Christian colleges. He once wrote that he often wondered whether he had done more good as a preacher or by distributing religious books.

Only God can give the final answer to that question. All I know is that while I would have liked to have heard Cartwright preach, I did not have that privilege. However, his book is still distributed. Get it. You will be inspired and entertained.

Footnote from Woody Gregory, Cartwright Men’s Fellowship President:
“I have read the Autobiography and have three copies that I have loaned to those wishing to read. The book will make for interesting reading how God called and used a sixteen year old boy to further the Kingdom of God. Thanks.

Autobiography of Peter Cartwright.

E.M. Bounds

E. M. Bounds is the most well-known author of the Southern Methodist Church. Edward McKendree Bounds (1835-1913) was born in Missouri. Before he was nineteen he had passed the bar and was licensed to practice as an attorney at law. In 1859 the young lawyer experienced entire sanctification and a call to full-time ministry. A few months later he took down his shingle and closed his law office. He began to devour the Bible and John Wesley’s sermons. Before Christmas of 1859 he was preaching in a little Methodist Episcopal Church, South in Monticello, Missouri. In February of the following year he was licensed to preach.

Sometime during the fall of 1861 he was arrested by Union troops because of his denominational affiliation. The evidence is that he was treated harshly and placed in a federal prison at St. Louis. He began to function as a Confederate chaplain among the troops there.

He was freed at the end of 1862 in a prisoner of war exchange. He served as a Confederate chaplain through the rest of the Civil War. Once more he was taken prisoner in November 1864.

After the war he pastored in Franklin, Tennessee, and then in Selma, Alabama. While in Selma he met his future wife. In 1874 he was transferred to St. Louis and married her in 1876. She died in 1886, leaving him with three young children. Before her death, she requested that he marry his cousin, whom she was confident would make her husband a good wife and her children a good mother. Almost two years later, E. M. married the woman his wife had chosen for him. She bore him three sons and a daughter. However, during the five-year period between 1886-1891 he buried a wife and two young sons. Later in life Bounds also had two grown children who quietly rebelled by denying his faith and becoming agnostics.

The family moved to Nashville so that Bounds could become the associate editor of the official denominational paper of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. He withstood every introduction of liberalism within his denomination, maintaining that the Bible was written “directly under the superintendency of the Holy Spirit.” He declared, “We hold definitely without compromise in the last to the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures.”

In 1894 he resigned this position to become an evangelist. Birmingham Southern College, a Methodist institution in Alabama, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree for his faithful service as a preacher and writer. For forty-six years Bounds pastored churches in Tennessee, Alabama, and Missouri. He spent three to four hours each day in prayer.

In 1902 Marshall Brothers in England published his first book titled Preacher and Prayer. He lived to see a second book, The Resurrection, printed. He felt called to a special writing ministry. He spent the last seventeen years of his life reading, writing, and rising before dawn every morning to pray. He prepared books on prayer as well as on Satan and heaven. In 1905 Bounds met Homer W. Hodge who undertook the task of publishing nine more books by Bounds after his death.

Here is a bibliography of the books by Bounds:
Preacher and Prayer (London: Marshall Brothers, 1902). This was revised and printed by the Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1907 as Power through Prayer.
Purpose in Prayer (1920).
Heaven: A Place — A City — A Home (1921).
Prayer and Praying Men (1921).
Satan: His Personality, Power and Overtthrow (1922).
The Possibilities of Prayer (1923).
The Reality of Prayer (1924).
The Essentials of Prayer (1925).
The Necessity of Prayer (1929).
Weapons of Prayer (1931).